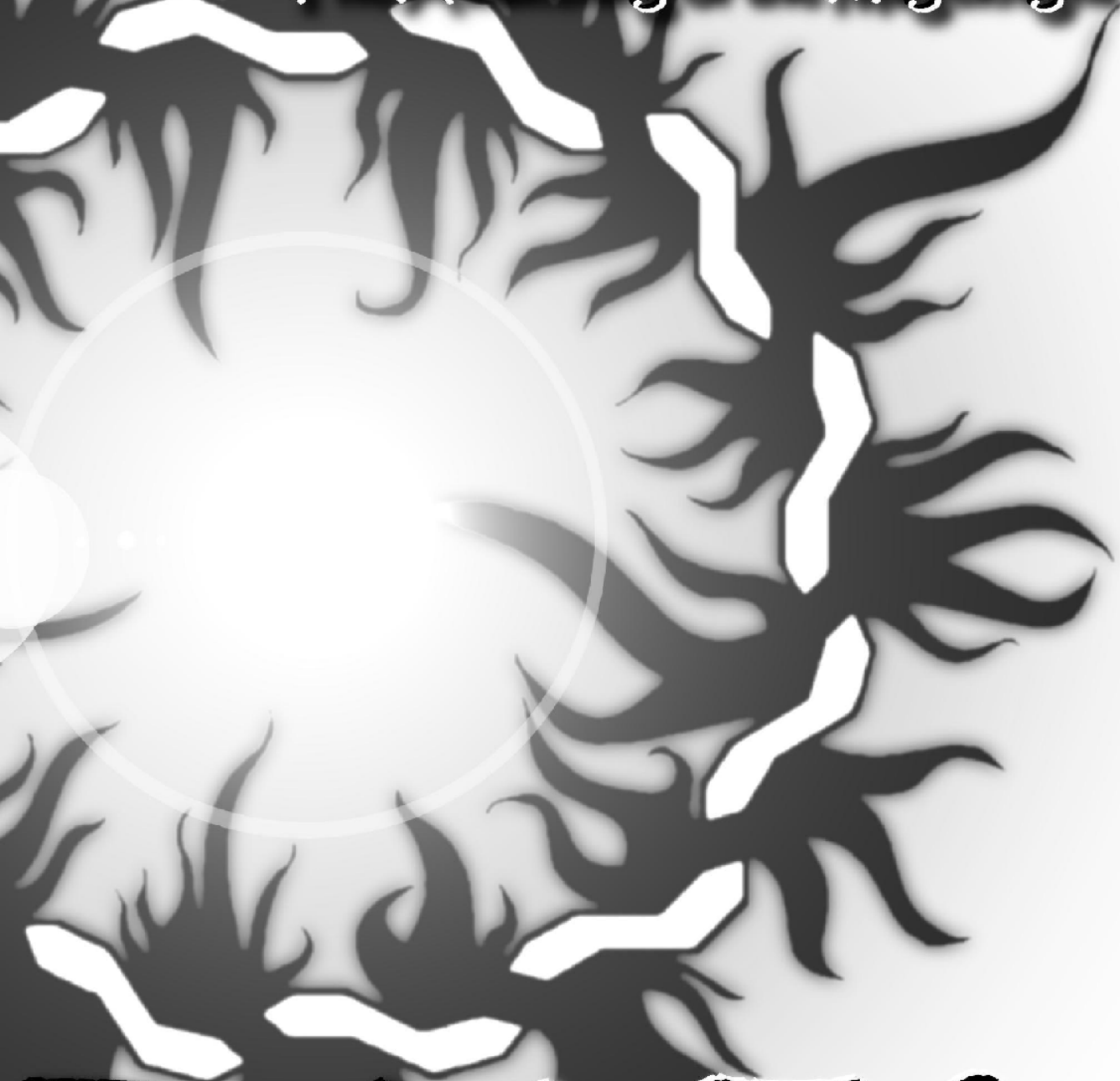


Light & Dark:

The Awakening of the Mageknight



D.M. Fife

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Daniel M. Fife

Light & Dark: The Awakening of the Mageknight

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Light & Dark Series

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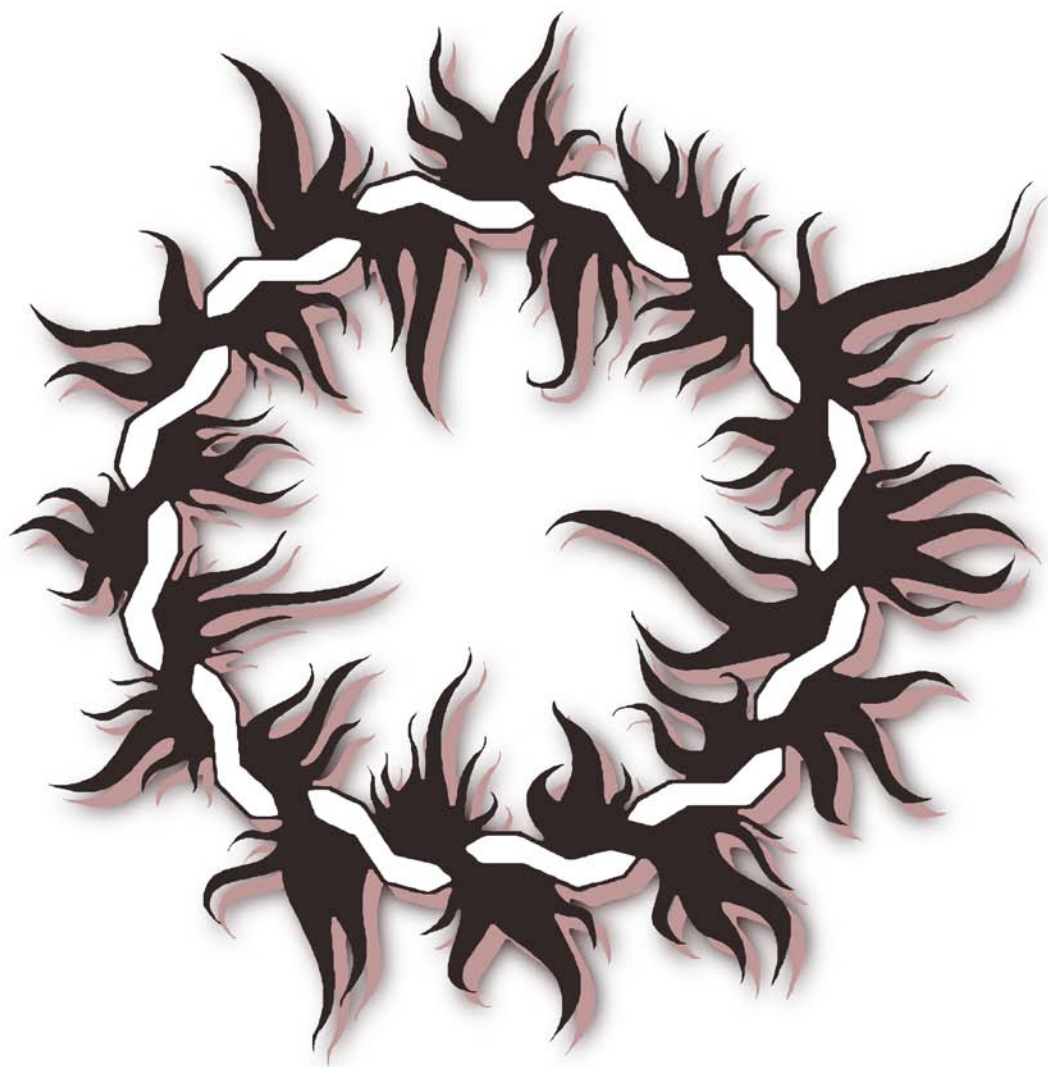
The Black Bonded

Light & Dark:

Greyknight

DEDICATION

To my family and friends for serving as support and inspiration.



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A New Face



ake up!" Danny's mother yelled, opening the creaking door of his room. "You're going to be late for your first day of school."

"Alright... alright, I'm up... I'm up," Danny said, more out of instinct than waking thought. He heard his mother's footfalls stop at the side of his bed. Reaching over him, she turned on the lamp that rested on top of the nightstand near his pillow. The bulb hummed with power, the soft light it produced compelled him to pull the blanket over his head.

"Come on!" Danny heard his mother call as she retreated down the hall. Her voice sounded muffled from the distance, yet, still able to force his eyes open.

Grumbling, Danny drove himself from the warm comfort of his soft bed. Throwing the covers off, he put both feet on the floor. Yawning, he stood up and walked to the front of the closet. Examining each colorful piece of clothing that hung, pressed and wrinkle-free, on a series of plastic hangers, he forced his mind to the task of getting ready. He—or, rather, his mother—had already selected the outfit he was supposed to wear on this particular day. She'd made up her mind the night before after what had felt like hours of indecisiveness. A pair of new khaki shorts and a blue T-shirt lay folded on a rocking chair to his

left. However, now faced with the uncertain importance of a first impression, he was not quite sure what to wear.

"Danny, come on!" his mother yelled once again.

"I'm coming!" Danny yelled back, his frustration getting the better of him.

He yanked his favorite white printed T-shirt from the hamper and grabbed the new pair of khaki shorts, leaving the blue T to fall in a heap on the floor. Putting on the shorts, slipping on the T, he sighed with satisfaction as he looked down to admire the black dragon printed on the front of the shirt. It was still summer, after all, and although jeans were preferable, he refused to sweat just by the simple act of walking to the bus. He grabbed a black sweatshirt on the off-chance that he might get cold in the climate controlled school, then he threw on his socks, his shoes, and walked down the hall; his mother was waiting for him in the kitchen.

The smell of bacon and toast invaded his nostrils as his stomach made a low, rumbling growl. He was hungrier than he originally thought.

"Danny!" his mother yelled, just as he rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. "Oh," she said, lowering her tone of voice after seeing him standing in front of her. "I guess you are awake, then, aren't you?"

"...If you consider this awake," his tone thick with sarcasm as he stretched out stiff limbs.

Used to the morning cynicism, she ignored his tone. "Your breakfast is on the table. You should hurry. The bus will be here in about fifteen minutes and I want a picture of you on your first day of school."

Danny let out a long sigh, retrieving a plastic cup from the cupboard.

"Don't you sigh at me," she said, smiling, "besides, you look so cute in your new shorts." Doing a double-take, she added, "Where's the blue T-shirt I picked out for you?"

Danny shrugged innocently.

"Isn't the shirt you're wearing dirty?"

Once again, Danny shrugged his shoulders. He refused to lie, but he also refused to give his mother the satisfaction of being right.

She sighed, but, was content to let the matter go.

With sullen shoulders, Danny opened the refrigerator and poured a glass of cold milk.

"Hurry up, you still need to brush your teeth."

Danny obeyed as he crossed the short distance to the table. He made quick work of his breakfast. The warm meal filled him with energy.

Finished, he made his way back down the short hallway, into the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirrored cabinet, he inspected his appearance. Not too scrawny, not exactly built of brawn, Danny was, perhaps, the picture of an average thirteen-year-old. His short brown hair didn't require much care, but he

ran a comb through it anyway. He stared back at the dark-green eyes that regarded him in the reflection with interest, eventually deciding that his appearance was as good as it was likely to get. He sighed, splattered his toothbrush with paste, and began pushing and pulling the brush across his teeth.

"Danny, are you almost done?" his mother yelled from down the hall.

Refusing to respond with a mouthful of white foam, he rinsed and spat.

The floor rumbled with the sound of heavy footfalls. "Danny!" she said again, this time her voice coincided with the rhythmic approach of her feet. She stopped just outside the door. "Come on, Danny. The bus will be here soon."

Throwing his toothbrush back into the small cup on the side of the sink, he finished, wiped his mouth and opened the door. His mother stood there, in her blue cloth nightgown and yellow slippers, with a camera in her hand. Her hair, unkempt and frayed, was a faded brown, the same color as her eyes. She was pleasantly plump; perfect for hugging, a fact Danny enjoyed taking advantage of—just not in public.

"Come on, get your bag."

Since he had little choice, he moved with purpose, picked up his book bag and his sweatshirt, and walked outside.

"Okay, um... stand over by the bushes," she said, gesturing with her hand.

The sun had just begun the long climb into the sky; the bright morning rays forced Danny to squint.

"Don't squint, hold still," said his mother, her tone stern and commanding.

In the distance, Danny could hear the hum of the bus engine, the unmistakable sound of a deep, rumbling roar. "Mom, the bus is coming!" he yelled through clenched teeth, still holding his pose.

"Alright, just hold still." There was a slight clicking sound as the camera snapped the picture. "Got it."

"Bye, Mom." He didn't wait for her response, just sprinted to the other side of the road where the bus would pick him up.

"Have a good day!" Danny heard his mother call out.

The large yellow bus turned the corner down the street and had to stop at a stop sign, giving Danny just enough time to reach the opposite side of the street. The bus hissed to a stop and the sliding door squeaked as it opened. Taking a deep breath, he climbed the three steps up and into the bus.

The bus driver smiled at him as he passed by, "Morning, Danny," she said.

"Morning," Danny said, making his way down the aisle, looking out of the side windows. He couldn't believe it; his mother hadn't gone back into the house. She was still in the same spot, vigorously waving at him in her nightgown and slippers.

At that moment, he was glad that he was one of the earlier pickups—sixth, when he counted the other kids on the bus. They all wore familiar faces, but they weren't friends of his. With a quickened step, he moved back toward the rear of the bus. The door behind him squeaked as it closed and the engine thrummed with power. The sudden movement forced Danny to grab onto one of the seatbacks to slow him down. Using the slight force of motion, he swung himself into the second to last seat.

Slumping down in the seat, he stared out of the window as houses, trees, and cars flashed by, causing the hypnotic spell of movement to force his eyes downward.

"Hey, Danny," said someone from behind him.

Danny felt the weight of an impact as someone sat down next to him. Looking out of the window, seeing the white and blue house, he already knew who it was.

"Hey, Alonso," he said, turning to see the familiar face of his friend.

The slender, black-haired boy smiled back, his usual smirk. Of Latino descent, Alonso had a darker complexion, accenting the blue of his eyes. On most days, Danny appreciated his straightforward way of talking, but not today.

"Hey, your backpack is kind of stupid-looking," he said, gesturing to the puke-green bag in Danny's lap.

"Yeah, my mom bought it without asking me first."

Alonso Martinez was the kind of person who could talk for hours upon end about any subject that he deemed important. He was one of those who simply liked to talk, whether anyone was actually listening or not. Worse still, he lacked a filter; he would often say whatever came to mind, no matter how socially awkward. However, he was also well-known for his athletic ability on the wrestling team; his wiry build made him the perfect choice for the lighter-weight classes. He had a reputation as one of the best wrestlers on the team, allowing his mouth to get him into trouble only with teachers, while deterring peers from picking on him.

The bus, now full of students, screeched to a stop on a slight incline and lined up at an angle to the sidewalk that ran the length of the school. Danny, along with Alonso—in the midst of discussing his summer—was one of the last ones off. Familiar faces walked past Danny as he followed the line toward the double glass doors that marked the entrance to the lower half of the school. He allowed Alonso to go through first, holding the door open for himself and one other, being polite.

He saw a flash of movement in the corner of his eye; his heart sank to the pit of his stomach as he gazed upon a new face. Her skin was the creamy color of the pale moon, dotted by a collection of soft freckles. Her hair was jet black, draped just past her shoulders, with a subtle indication of curling. Her almond-

colored eyes, accented by the slightest pull of an oval shape, hinted at her Asian heritage; they seemed to glow with golden flecks in the morning sun.

"Thanks," she said in a delicate voice as she breezed past him, the scent of wild roses following in her wake.

Danny gulped down hard, struggling for something to say. However, time refused to wait forever; as the moment passed, she disappeared into the crowd of incoming students.

"Who was that?" he asked Alonso.

Alonso's blue eyes darted into the swell of students. Turning back to Danny, he shrugged in response. "Must be a new student," he said.

The ten-minute bell rang, forcing Danny out of his sudden reverie.

"Well, I'll see ya later," said Alonso, bounding off up the stairs.

Alone, in the middle of a sea of familiar and unfamiliar faces, Danny walked down the hall that paralleled the gym and looked for his locker number. He found it without difficulty, made a mental note of its location and then ascended the stairs to locate his first class.

The day progressed smoothly. His first class was music, his second was math. He had yet to acquire any homework, but since it was the first day, that was to be expected.

Looking down at his schedule, in the busy hallway after math class, he confirmed that gym was next. He walked through the double steel doors that marked the entrance to the gym, just before the five-minute bell. He was surprised to see Chris Greene standing over by the bleachers.

"Hey, Chris!" Danny yelled, waving.

Chris Greene was his best friend and his only popular acquaintance in school, other than Alonso. Known for his aptitude in the martial arts, as well as the wrestling ring and football field, Chris had broad shoulders, intimidating biceps and an ever-present look of confidence. Practicing the martial arts, specifically Bushi Ryu Jujitsu, was a family tradition—a tradition his father had insisted upon as soon as Chris had been capable of walking. He was, perhaps, in better shape than anyone else in school. He was the last person anyone would ever try to bully, which often worked out well for Danny. He kept his brown hair trimmed short and his green eyes always seemed to have an air of wisdom about them. He was, over-all, the typical jock—except for the fact that he was, above all, a nice person and a good friend.

"Hey, Danny, how were your first few classes?" Chris asked, after waving back, closing the distance between them.

"Alright, I guess. No homework."

"Same here, but we still have three more classes today."

"Oh, don't remind me," Danny said, jokingly.

The final bell sounded, echoing throughout the gym.

"Well, I guess that means it's time for P.E.," said Chris, looking around, running his right hand through his dark-brown hair.

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen!" Mr. Ingram yelled. The gym teacher stood in the middle of the glossy wooden floor. "Over here please, so that we can take attendance," he said, pointing to a spot in the center of the gym floor. "Now, when I call your name, I want you to sit where I direct you."

While Mr. Ingram called out names and organized the group, Danny took the opportunity to investigate the other faces that made up his class.

The first person he recognized was Steven Rooney, the all-around jock and bully. Big and bulky for his age, Steven used his size to intimidate others and push them around. He had a bulbous nose and a rounded chin, giving him a comical look that might have made others laugh if he wasn't a middle school bully.

Standing beside him as he scratched a scalp of long, curly, brown hair stood Marie Topeland, a mean-spirited young girl who thought the world owed her everything and more. With cold grey eyes, accented by a heavy dose of eye shadow, she looked lazily around the gym while sighing at her own misfortune. Her clothes mimicked those of the most fashionable. The popular girl in school, she seemed to always have the same smug look on her face. Mean, vicious, and condescending, she could often be crueler with words than Steven could ever hope to be with brawn.

Danny sighed at his luck. Of all the classes, why did he have to end up in the same class with these two?

Continuing to search through the crowd, he stopped, noticing one familiar person, in particular.

Her black hair, now tied up in a ponytail, left her softly freckled face revealed for him to investigate further. She wore a white T-shirt and blue denim jeans. She was slender, yet commanded an aura of strength.

"Chris?" Danny asked, nudging his friend in the side.

"What?"

"Who's that?" Caught in his own trance, Danny neglected to point out the person he intended his friend to name.

Without questioning him, Chris followed his friend's gaze. "I don't know, man. I've never seen her before. She must be a new girl."

No matter how hard he tried, Danny couldn't take his eyes off her. He had suffered the curse of crushes before, yet nothing had ever felt this strong to him. For some reason, he had to get to know this girl.

Her head swiveled in his direction. Danny felt his heart skip a beat as he moved to avert his eyes, hoping she hadn't noticed him staring.

Someone said his name. "Danny! Danny Firoth!"

Danny searched the gym and found that all eyes were on him.

"Pay attention, Danny!" Mr. Ingram yelled, giving the other students an excuse to laugh. "Quiet!" he commanded, pushing a pair of black-rimmed glasses farther up the bridge of his nose. With slinky, black hair cut in the shape of a bowl and a bulky build, Mr. Ingram was a humorous, imposing sight, but no one ever laughed at him, openly. "You're in group B, Danny," he said, pointing to a spot on the gym floor.

Beyond embarrassed, Danny stalked over to his designated spot and sat down. He sighed as the teacher called out three more names, one of which, to Danny's sullen surprise, was Marie Topeland. However, Danny felt a little better when Mr. Ingram announced Chris's name next.

The students sat in rows of four, which placed Chris right next to Danny, and Marie to his upper right. Both boys gave each other a high-five as Chris walked over to where Mr. Ingram pointed.

"Alright, and now those of you who will be in group C," continued the teacher, after calling off the last three names of the students who would be in Danny's group.

Danny kept his attention focused on the new face. He was desperate to know her name; he figured he was relatively clever to wait until the teacher placed her in a group, calling her name out loud.

Mr. Ingram went down the list as Danny waited with a growing impatience. He listened painstakingly to name after name, and he grinned triumphantly when he heard the unfamiliar one.

"Sabrina Drake?"

Danny watched her with a focused stare as recognition flashed in her body's posture; she raised her slender right arm in confirmation. "Here," she said in a soft tone.

To his upper right, Marie snorted. "The new girl looks ridiculous. Just look at her clothes. And her hair—I mean, come on."

Danny glared at her, intent on doing or saying something in Sabrina's defense.

As if sensing his anger from behind, Marie turned around. "Boo, can I help you?"

Danny bit his lip and turned his gaze back to Sabrina Drake as she walked to her designated place and descended with a practiced grace, folding her legs as she sat. She flicked the length of her long black ponytail behind her so that it rested in the small of her back just before turning and looking in Danny's direction. Whether she'd sensed his gaze or heard Marie's comments, Danny wasn't sure. In either case, her eyes stared into his.

He felt his heart skip a beat for the second time as his body temperature jumped ten degrees. He dropped his gaze with a quick jerk of the head and turned to Chris, who looked interested in a girl of his own.

In group A, in the first row, second back, sat Ann Nelson. She was athletic, labeled by most as a tomboy, which Danny surmised held Chris' attention. Her deep-red hair danced as she talked with another girl behind her.

"You talk to her yet?" Danny asked, trying to puzzle out his own emotions.

Chris shrugged. "Yeah, but I think I'm stuck in the category of 'just friends.'" He held up his hands and made little quotation marks with his fingers to emphasize his point. "What class do you have next?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Uh," Danny said, digging in his pockets and pulling out a half-sheet of white paper, "Science. What about you?"

"Shop class, Ann is in the same class."

"That should be fun."

"Yeah, we'll see."

The time passed slower than Danny would have liked. The first day of school was always the worst. It was the distinct and final end of the summer, a time of freedom and exploration. The start of school signaled the end of fun and the beginning of learning.

Fantasies and daydreams danced through Danny's head as Mr. Ingram explained the rules and outlined the activities of the year. Occasionally, Danny would hear something that caught his attention, but he spent most of the time staring at the new girl or lost in his own creative delusions.

At long last, the bell rang, an indistinct tone came through the school's intercom system.

"Thank god," said Marie and, for once, Danny was inclined to agree with her.

"Which way you going, Danny?" Chris asked, standing up, stretching, looking in the opposite direction.

"I have to go to my locker and get my science book." Danny followed his friend's gaze and saw Ann in deep conversation with another girl. "I'll see you later, man."

Chris nodded, "Yeah, later, man." He waved and walked toward the group that held Ann's attention.

Danny searched the dispersing group and found what he sought. Sabrina Drake was about to walk out of the double doors on the left side of the gym. He needed to hurry if he was going to find out where her locker was.

Danny made quick time to his own locker, surprising himself as he remembered the combination without looking at the piece of paper in his pocket. Pulling out his backpack and stuffing the science book inside, he slammed his locker shut, spun the lock and darted off down the hall. He felt a rush of excitement as he dashed in, around, and between the busy students of the crowded hallway. Taking an immediate right down the smaller hall that led to the stairs, he weaved between two groups of bodies. He took the steps two

at a time; he knew he had to hurry if he was going to catch her. By his calculations, she should be halfway down the upper hall. Luckily, this part of the school was much wider, giving him ample room to maneuver.

"Stop running in the halls!"

Danny knew that voice didn't belong to a student. Strong arms gripped him, grinding his progress to a shuddering halt. Danny turned around to find Ms. Samantha, the art teacher, with an iron grip on his backpack. Tied up in a ponytail, her long, blonde hair draped just past her neck, leaving her focused brown eyes to peer into Danny's frightened gaze. Her expression was firm, but carried an air of kindness.

"Walk, please," she said with a slight grin.

Danny nodded, "Sorry."

"That's alright, just don't be in such a hurry next time. You still have five minutes till class starts." She smiled and relinquished her grip, allowing Danny to disappear into the small stream of quick-moving students.

Danny trudged along in annoyance. He would have to find her locker some other time. He sighed and realized that he was close to science class at least. With the need to hurry over, he descended the stairs located in the middle of the long hallway and located the large, green double doors, the entrance to the science labs.

Taking out the small piece of white paper, he found the classroom and sat in a desk near the back.

The room, separated from the other classrooms by a series of thick boards on wheels, was in the shape of a crude triangle. Six science stations, each equipped with a faucet and sink, test tubes and stools lined the back of the room. Above each station were slanted windows with white blinds, shielding the room from the sun. The entire science area was one large octagon, with six classrooms constructed in the east and west corners, three on each side.

Danny could hear voices coming from the labs on the other side of the building, most likely sixth or seventh graders. He heard two familiar voices echo down the hall, nearing the room. Danny recognized the quick-tongued boy as none other than Alonso; the other, a rather loud, high-pitched voice, had to be Matt Mickler. The two youths strolled past the wheeled wall and entered the room.

Danny was happy to see the pair of familiar friendly faces.

Matt Mickler, somewhat overweight, kept his bulk concealed beneath oversized shirts that tended toward the darker shades of the color spectrum, featuring his favorite metal bands printed across the chest. His jet-black hair was just long enough to get in the way of his purple eyes, causing him to adjust a pair of black glasses with thick lenses and heavy frames. Due to his tendency to be a bit hyperactive at times, in combination with his nerdy appearance, Matt

was often the target of bullying. His quick wit and sharp tongue never seemed to help matters. He usually found victory in conflicts of rhetoric, but disagreements of the physical nature tended not to end in his favor.

"Hey, Danny!" Matt yelled. "Wait till you see my new card. Did you bring your deck to class?"

Danny nodded and dug through his backpack, pulling out a small rectangular box.

Over the summer, Danny and his friends had gotten involved in Knights, a popular card game, where creatures of fantasy and knights of legend were used to defeat the opposing players. The players were divided into three factions: Light, Grey, and Dark. The game pitted the forces of good, neutral and evil against one another. Danny's box portrayed the emblem of Light, an intricate circle of glowing white chain intertwined with links of black, engulfed in tendrils of darkness.

Matt pulled a small card box from his own backpack, with the symbol of Grey emblazoned upon it, a weave of grey chain linked in a circle. Matt had chosen the neutral faction for his deck, using technology and fanatical knights to win battles, while Light used righteous knights and holy dragons to defeat opponents.

"Look at this," Matt said. He pulled a deck of cards from the box, took the top card from the pile and held it up for both Danny and Alonso to see.

"That game is stupid," Alonso said, sighing, taking a seat in front of Danny.

Ignoring the boy in front of him, Danny leaned over to inspect his friend's new card—a heavily-armored knight in brass-colored armor sitting upon a jet-black steed. The artwork, as with most of the cards in the game, looked quite detailed.

"Wow, that's going to be tough to beat," said Danny, taking the card and admiring it. Opening his own deck box, he pulled out a crisp, glossy card. The picture on the card boasted a monstrous silver-scaled dragon. Written in bold, black lettering on the upper left of the card was the name of the dragon, *Tyramear*. Handing the card to Matt, Danny said, "I got that about two days ago, had to trade some of my best cards to get it."

"Wow!" Matt said, taking the card, looking it over. "We still have a few minutes before class. You want to play?"

Danny was about to say yes when a familiar face passed through the doorway and entered the make-shift room. "Um... no, I don't think we have time," said Danny, handing Matt's card back with a quick jerk of the hand. Retrieving his own cards, he put the deck box back in his pack.

Sabrina Drake crossed the row of desks and walked down the aisle next to Danny's, sitting next to him.

Danny's palms began to sweat, and the room seemed to jump twenty degrees.

"Hi, I'm Sabrina."

Danny's heart thumped with a heavy throb. He felt like he was about to pass out.

"Hi, I'm Matt," said the purple-eyed boy as he reached across Danny's desk with an outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you," he added with a smile.

After hesitating, with a look of puzzlement, she took Matt's hand and shook it, returning the smile. "You guys play Knights?" she asked, looking at the deck of cards in Matt's opposite hand.

"You know all about Knights!" Danny said, forgetting about his awkwardness.

Reaching into her small book bag, Sabrina pulled out a pale-colored deck box with the emblem of Light on the top.

"You play with the Light army?" Danny asked.

Nodding, Sabrina pulled out a handful of cards. "I like dragons and Light has the best-looking dragon cards."

Danny nodded, already knowing this simple fact. The truth was that he liked dragons as well.

"You want to play?" Matt asked.

Sabrina shrugged. "I don't think we have time."

Already, the room was filling up with a gathering of faces and a massing of voices.

Matt sighed, an obvious signal that he agreed, but he was also disappointed.

The final bell toned and an adult, Danny suspected she was their teacher, entered the room and held up her hand, ordering quiet.

"Alright, quiet down," she said. "My name is Mrs. Turner; I'll be teaching you biology this year." She was slender, with dark-red hair, with a voice that demanded attention.

However, that didn't stop Danny from focusing his attention on Sabrina as she slipped the white deck box back into her pack.

The hour passed more slowly than Danny could have imagined. He fluctuated between daydreams, the lecture and staring at Sabrina, who sat attentively next to him.

After what seemed like hours, the bell rang, signaling the end of the class. Looking over, Danny noticed that Sabrina had her science book open in front of her, as did anyone else who had been paying the least bit of attention. Looking down at his own empty desk, he realized that he needed to buy some time if he was going to walk with the new girl.

Bending over, Danny rifled through his backpack, attempting to give the appearance that he was searching for something. Looking over, he noticed that Sabrina was just about done packing.

"You coming, Danny?" Matt asked.

Looking up, Danny sighed.

Matt and Alonso were waiting by the exit. Matt's left foot thumped with impatience.

Standing up, Danny pulled his pack over his shoulder and looked over to find Sabrina smiling at him, still getting her things organized.

"Bye," she said in a musical tone, returning to the task of putting her book back in her bag.

"Bye," Danny said, he stalked off to where his friends waited.

Two more classes remained, history and English. Danny walked into his history classroom and sighed; he saw Steven Rooney sitting at the back.

At least the day is almost over, he thought, taking a seat toward the front. Danny wanted little to do with the troublemaker in the back of the room.

2

Trigger of Power

Danny awoke to the same sound most mornings, the high-pitched voice of his mother yelling his name.

Stretching, he yawned and went through the motions of the morning. He got dressed, ate breakfast, brushed his teeth, gave his mother a goodbye hug and went out to meet the bus.

The universe seemed right. Once again, Alonso plopped down next to him in the same seat that he always did, continuing to make meaningless small talk. Danny had come to learn that Alonso had a tendency to tell some outrageous fibs from time to time, yet they tended to be more amusing than anything else, so he felt content to let his friend babble.

A month had gone by; the sun rose just as it always did, casting a warm glow onto Danny's left cheek, Alonso continued to tell his tall tale.

The bus door screeched open and Danny followed in the tradition of standing up behind his friend, even though he'd been sitting toward the back. It would still be a little while before the line started moving. After a few moments, he worked his way to the front of the bus, greeted by chilly air. Winter hinted its approach, but he found the cool breeze refreshing.

The school day progressed just like any other day. Danny participated in a heated game of baseball during gym class; he struggled to make interesting small talk with his lab partner, Sabrina, in science class and he ate lunch with Matt, Chris, and Alonso. At least, it seemed like a normal day.

"Hey, Firoth!" an obnoxious voice yelled out, loud, deep, and throaty.

Danny stopped in mid-step. He was almost to the bus. He sighed, he knew whose voice had beckoned him. Turning, his fears were confirmed as he spotted Steven Rooney and his goons walking straight toward him.

Clay Tanter stood to Steven's left, Clay was a, tall, slender boy with slick black hair, known for his ability on the football team as the school's quarterback. Marie Topeland swayed menacingly on Stephen's right.

"Hold on, Firoth, I'm talking to you."

Danny looked around for anyone who could offer some assistance; he found only sympathy in the faces that regarded him. They weren't about to help him—his friend Chris was nowhere to be found. Alonso was probably already on the bus and Matt couldn't help, even if he was around and willing—he was no fighter.

Steven walked up and stopped a few feet from Danny's face. "You think it's funny, I failed that history test, Firoth?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I saw you laugh when Mrs. Swortsberger blurted out that I had the lowest grade in the class."

"Hey, Danny, what's going on?" a familiar voice asked from behind.

Danny turned to find Doug Garrett standing nearby. Doug was a newcomer to his circle of friends, as well as a Knights gamer. Doug dressed in the latest fashions, faded jeans, flip-flops, and light-colored polos—blue today. He often moved in the upper circles and kept himself distanced from those who would threaten him with bodily harm. No one ever seemed to be safe from Steven.

Looking on with a mixture of curiosity and fear, Doug stopped mid-step as he saw Steven Rooney looming just beyond him, where Danny stood.

"Get lost, fatty."

Doug was modestly plump—but Steven had the worst timing ever.

"Don't call him that!" Danny yelled, growing a backbone.

"What're you gonna do about it, Firoth?" Steven asked, inching forward so that his face was only a short distance from Danny's.

"I'm going to..."

"Shut up," interrupted Steven, stepping within striking distance, shoving Danny backwards.

Danny stumbled back and felt his body topple over. Instead of fighting the fall, he embraced it, rolling his body into a small ball. He planted both hands on the hard cement of the sidewalk; his back began to lift like a teeter-totter and he

pushed himself upward. He landed flat on his feet with his fists balled up, poised for a fight.

"Oh, you wanna fight, Firoth?" Steven snickered.

Looking down at himself, Danny noticed his stance and his clenched fists. He hadn't done that on purpose, he really didn't want to fight. Looking around, he noticed that the confrontation was drawing a crowd. If he backed down now, he'd surely earn the label of coward. However, if he didn't, he knew he was going to get hurt. *What do I do now?*

Danny desperately wanted to run away, but he held his ground.

Steven stepped closer. "Oh, you're gonna get it now, Firoth," drawing back his right fist.

Time seemed to slow as Danny focused his mind, he clenched his fists tighter, causing his knuckles to turn white.

An outline of Steven's body broke free of his physical form. The silhouette was white, translucent, like a ghost leaving its body. It jumped forward with a closed fist, followed through and released a wicked right-handed punch that dissipated as it passed through Danny's stomach without the slightest hint of density.

Confused, without a clue about what had just transpired, Danny stood still as a stone, stunned. However, he had no time to figure it out—time seemed to refocus, Steven stepped forward, moved in the exact same motion that the image had predicted he would, and connected with a solid punch to Danny's abdomen. An overpowering sensation of pain forced the air from Danny's lungs as his legs buckled beneath him; he toppled to his knees.

"That's what you get, Firoth," goaded Steven as he turned to leave.

Danny crisscrossed his arms around his stomach as he struggled to breathe. "It's... not... over," he said, wheezing through grunts and groans.

Steven stopped mid-step before turning back to face Danny; his expression was one of utter joy.

Coughing, Danny shuffled to his feet. He let his right hand fall to his side in a balled fist while his left remained clutched at his stomach.

Smiling, Steven stepped back within striking distance.

Rage fueled Danny's movements and focused his mind. *Again, an image appeared in the form of a soft, white aura, outlining Steven's body. It moved just in front of him, predicting his progress.*

"Are you sure about this, Firoth?" Steven asked, placing his hands on his hips.

Danny grimaced as he watched the outline of the larger boy's next move. "Positive," he said, ignoring the pain in his stomach.

The aura surrounding Steven's body jumped forward as the phantom image of his right arm slipped down from his side and shot outward. Aimed at the tip of Danny's nose, the balled fist passed harmlessly through his head, causing him to flinch in an instinctive reaction.

Moments later, Steven followed through with the same movement the silhouette had predicted.

Recovering from his confusion, knowing where the arm of the bigger boy would end up, Danny dodged to the right and aimed his own fist for the center of Steven's face. Connecting solidly, Danny's arm shuddered from the impact. The blow produced a loud thud, followed by a slight cracking sound; it sounded like a stalk of celery snapping in half.

Steven's expression turned from determination to surprise as he fell backward, his hands covering his face in a mix of pain and protection.

Danny stood at the ready, hovering over the larger boy. Steven was laid out on the ground in front of him. Danny remained still, fists balled up, prepared for whatever Steven might try next; he felt the eyes of everyone upon him. However, Steven never got up.

The only sound seemed to be coming from Steven's cries of agony as he clutched his nose. Crimson seeped from between Steven's fingers, streaming down the slope of his face, a sight Danny was not ready to see.

I didn't mean to hurt him. It wasn't my fault. He attacked me first. These thoughts, as well as many others, rushed through his mind.

Danny looked into the eyes of Marie Topeland as she stood behind her fallen friend. Her face showed a mixture of surprise and horror. Seeing nothing but fear in her gaze, Danny looked at Clay. Danny's sudden eye contact caused the slender boy to take a step backward.

"Danny Firoth!"

That's Mr. Ingram, my physical education teacher.

Strong arms gripped him and held him fast. "There's no fighting allowed on school grounds, you know that."

Confusion and fear spread through Danny's body like a forest fire.

Steven rolled from side to side, holding his face. A small puddle of blood began to accumulate beneath him.

"Take him to the nurse's office," Mr. Ingram said to Marie and Clay. Neither of them moved, shock still on their faces.

"Now!" ordered Mr. Ingram.

They nodded slowly, helped Steven to his feet and began walking back toward the school.

"You're coming with me, Danny Firoth. We're going to call your mother and tell her what happened. Then you're going to detention."

Unable to believe what had just happened, with no real choice of his own, Danny found himself pulled back toward the school.

He was hauled up the stairs to the double glass doors, the entrance to the middle school. Wide eyes and astonished faces regarded him. Danny couldn't

decide whether they viewed him as a hero or a villain. Among them, he noticed Matt's curious, surprised stare.

Mr. Ingram pulled Danny through the doors, across the hall and threw him into a padded chair in the office. The stuffing in the seat was minimal, very uncomfortable upon impact.

"I didn't start it," Danny pleaded, watching Mr. Ingram dig through student files.

"Well, you certainly finished it, didn't you?" He pulled out a manila-colored folder with Danny's name printed at the top. He walked over to the phone, picked up the receiver and began dialing.

Danny sighed as he sank back into the uncomfortable chair.

"Hello, Ms. Patricia Firoth, please," Mr. Ingram said into the receiver.

Unwilling to listen to the conversation, Danny turned his attention to the students passing by in the hall, wishing he was one of them.

"Danny," said Matt, poking his head in through the office doors, "What happened?"

"I, uh..."

"This doesn't concern you, Mr. Mickler," Mr. Ingram said, before Danny could verbalize his plight.

Matt cringed, apologized and vanished into the thinning crowd in the hall.

"Patricia Firoth?" Mr. Ingram asked, turning his attention back to the phone.

Danny listened as Mr. Ingram explained the situation in cringing detail.

"Yes... okay... understood." He hung up the phone and turned to Danny. "Come with me," gesturing with his finger while opening the glass door with his other hand.

Danny shuffled his feet in an attempt to buy time, but he complied.

"You're going straight to detention," Mr. Ingram informed him. "Your mother is going to pick you up afterward." He led Danny a short way down the hall and turned right. They went down two flights of stairs; Mr. Ingram opened a pair of dark-green doors that led into the cafeteria.

"Sit here!" Mr. Ingram pointed at a specific table. "Be quiet, no sleeping. I'm going to find you something to do," he said, leaving Danny by himself in the large, empty room.

Left to his own devices, Danny went over the incident in his mind. The events were already beginning to blur, to meld into one another. It all happened so fast, and yet, somehow, he'd beat-up the biggest kid in eighth grade. The beginnings of a smile creased his cheeks the more he thought about it. People would look at him differently now. The smile widened; Danny felt the amusement build. *I'll be a hero*, he thought to himself, fighting the glee he was feeling.

"I don't know why you're smiling," Mr. Ingram said as he returned with a handful of pencils and some paper.

Danny's smile disappeared faster than it had begun.

Laying the pencil and paper down in front of Danny, Mr. Ingram continued, "You're going to write Mr. Rooney an apology letter, and you're going to write me a four-page essay about 'why it's not acceptable to fight in school'."

"But, I didn't..."

"That doesn't matter right now. If you'd done what any other sensible person would've done, walked away, you wouldn't be in this position, would you?"

"And what, be laughed at by everyone else?"

Mr. Ingram put both hands on the table and met Danny's eyes in a tense stare. "It takes more courage to do what's right than it does to try to look cool, Mr. Firoth."

Danny looked away and focused on the center of the table. "You don't know what it's like," Danny said in a soft voice. "Steven picks on everyone and if I don't stand up to him, who will?"

Mr. Ingram's voice grew softer, mimicking Danny's low tone. "Are you going to fight the whole world, Danny? Are you going to save everyone?"

Danny felt confusion and frustration burning within his stomach. The argument had taken a turn he hadn't expected. He let his silence answer for him.

Mr. Ingram sighed and pushed the paper toward him. "Just work on the assignment, Danny." He turned and walked toward a desk in the corner.

"Yes," Danny said to his teacher's back.

"Yes, what, Danny?" turning around, looking at his student with obvious curiosity.

"I'll always fight for what's right. I'll defend those who can't defend themselves, no matter what."

"Then I guess we'll be seeing a lot of each other." He turned back to his desk.

3

A Date with the Dark

Nearly two hours had passed when Danny put the final defining words on the four-page essay. Beyond the windows, the sun was barely visible, sending the last, soft waves of light streaking into the cafeteria. It would be dark soon.

"I'm done," said Danny, holding the four pieces of paper up for Mr. Ingram to see.

Mr. Ingram moved toward Danny, retrieved the white pieces of paper and began to read.

Danny had been honest but, at the same time, he'd written the essay in an attempt to play to his teacher's point of view. He didn't want to have to write the paper over again.

After reading the last page, Mr. Ingram lowered the papers to his side and said, "Good, well-written, Danny. So the next time you find yourself in this situation, what are you going to do?"

"Walk away," he lied.

Danny had meant every word in their earlier conversation. Steven was a menace to all the students in the school, those who couldn't stick up for themselves, and Danny felt good about what he'd done.

"You're free to go," Mr. Ingram said, gathering up the paper and pencils. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Danny nodded. He slung his backpack over his shoulder and ran out of the huge room before Mr. Ingram could change his mind. He couldn't wait to get home, despite the scolding he knew was waiting for him. Quickening his step to a jog, he moved down the narrow hall, toward the entrance to the bottom half of the school, where he knew his mother would probably be waiting for him.

The hall was oddly quiet, as opposed to the usual collection of voices. The overwhelming silence was a little disturbing. Danny picked up the pace some more, almost turning his trot into an all-out sprint. He reached the glass doors faster than he thought possible. Peering outside, he failed to see his mother's car and sighed at the prospect of imprisonment within the deserted halls of the school for much longer than he cared to be there.

Time passed, with it so did the comforting light of the sun. Danny slumped down against the brick wall next to the glass doors. Boredom set in as he stared beyond, hoping with a pleading desperation that his mother would show up any second.

With time to kill, Danny retreated inward, working through the events of the day. Everything seemed so normal until... *how could I have done what I did?* Danny pondered the question, seeing the fight in his mind, trying to discover how he had bested the largest boy in his grade.

Unable to unravel the riddle, Danny sighed, resting the back of his head against the cool wall behind him. Whatever had happened, whatever he'd done, whatever it meant was lost to him. At the least, he would get the respect he deserved, maybe Steven would leave him alone from now on. This wish brought a slight smirk to Danny's face.

An abrupt rumble forced him from his thoughts, the walls quaked around him and the floor shook beneath him.

"Earthquake?" whispered Danny, struggling to regain his footing and find a doorway to shelter under. The shudder lasted for a second only. Danny peered out, underneath the threshold of the gym doors. "In Indiana, I doubt it," he said, answering himself. "What was that?" he asked the looming darkness.

Danny crept out into the middle of the hallway and glanced beyond the glass doors. Against his better judgment, he decided to investigate.

He stalked down the shadowy hallway. The overhead lights remained off, leaving the dull auxiliary lights to illuminate the way. To his right, he passed the door to the boys' restroom; to his left, a long line of blue lockers. Danny noticed his own locker as he skulked by.

Halfway down the hall, the school shuddered again. With nothing to dive under for shelter, he forced his back against the steel lockers, making a loud

clang; he buried his face between his knees and wrapped his arms around the top of his head for protection. He'd learned the posture during tornado drills and figured it would work in his current circumstance.

Just as quickly as it had started, the shaking ceased, the floor stilled once again. Looking up from his cradled position, he noticed small pieces of the ceiling falling like snowflakes, shaken loose by the sudden tremor.

Danny pushed himself to his feet and began walking down the foreboding hall once again.

Danny finally reached the cross-section of the hallway. The hall continued ahead of him, leading to the shop classroom and a smaller gym. To his left, a pair of steel doors marked the entrance to the main gym. To his right, another hall led to the home economics classroom, stairs went up to the rest of the school, and two glass doors opened to the outside, a sudden vibration alerted him to the possible origin of the commotion.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Danny turned right and began walking down the hall. It was a short cut to the science labs. Enclosed by the school on three sides, the area beyond the outside path served as a parking lot and a courtyard.

From his position halfway down the hall, Danny made out the familiar road that led into the large expanse. He still couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. The ground rumbled beneath him once again, as if objecting to some unseen event.

Danny decided to use the brick wall as cover, throwing his back up against it for reassurance. He shuffled along the side, toward the glass doors and whatever lay beyond.

Inches away from the panes, his hands began to tremble. Pressed against the brick, he couldn't make out anything except for the familiar path to the opposite side of the school.

Building up his courage, Danny crept up to the doors and peeked out, only to find the brick blocking his view. He would have to go outside.

Forcing the heavy doors open, ever-so-slightly, Danny heard strange noises coming from around the corner. Shuddering thuds echoed throughout the enclosed schoolyard. The ground rumbled and a loud bang thundered from somewhere beyond his sight, as if something large had just collided with the school. He almost forgot that the doors would lock behind him if he allowed them to close. He didn't want to be stuck outside with whatever lay beyond. Untangling his backpack from his arms, he positioned it between the glass door and the doorsill, keeping it open.

Satisfied with his escape route, Danny crept along the wall and peeked around it. What he saw took the breath right out of his lungs; it caused his heart to pound in his chest and made his legs turn to rubber.

With pearl-colored teeth that gleamed in the light of the lamp and shiny black claws that danced and scraped at the cement, the dragon's almond eyes darted in random directions, as if searching for prey. The creature's scales reflected the soft light, causing them to glitter with a rosy hue. About the height and width of a large car and the length of a bus, the dragon looked slender—like a snake, with the addition of powerful arms and legs complete with wickedly sharp talons and a pair of wide-spread wings. Elongated, similar to the head of an alligator, the dragon's head sprouted twin smooth, ebony horns that narrowed to frightful points, originating from just behind its brow.

"A dragon!" Danny said in a hushed tone. The dragon jumped, swatting at some unseen foe. It was the most beautiful, most frightening creature that he had ever seen.

Then something dark, distorted by an aura of thick black smoke, pulled his attention away from the dragon. Danny peered closer, searching for details—for a split-second he thought he saw a form in the swirling mist. He could make out a head with red eyes, thin, lanky arms and long, wiry legs. Something silvery gleamed in the thing's outstretched fingers, as it batted at the larger form of the dragon. The churning smoke dissipated, he could see that the dark creature's weapons were long, sharp claws.

Danny couldn't believe his own eyes. He took a few steps forward to get a better view. However, on the second step, he failed to watch his footing, felt his shoe catch, and stumbled forward. He tumbled to the ground with a grunt; he caught his weight by placing both hands flat on the cement.

Where there had once been the sound of combat, an eerie silence followed. Gulping down his fear, Danny looked up to find the gaze of the dragon and the wicked red eyes of the smoky creature locked on him.

The soft brown eyes of the dragon shone with small flecks of gold, endless, intoxicating and almost friendly.

Below the hypnotic gaze of the dragon, Danny found the penetrating stare of the dark humanoid. The wind picked up in earnest, causing the thick smoke surrounding the creature to part momentarily. Instantly, Danny made out an array of pointy white teeth that seemed distorted in a vain attempt at a smile. It was most certainly not a greeting of friendship.

The black creature took three elongated steps toward Danny and leapt into the air with amazing speed.

Unable to move, Danny watched helplessly as the black thing barreled down on him. He closed his eyes and waited for the pain to come—yet it never did. Instead, he heard a high-pitched screech, like a wounded animal. Opening his eyes, he saw the dark creature before him, too close for comfort, its torso wrapped in black talons. The thing screamed; it lashed out at him, the thin, silver fingernails flicking within inches of his face.

With a deep, throaty growl, the dragon flung its enemy to the opposite side of the yard. Danny watched as the black thing flew through the air, thudded against the brick wall and then fell to the ground in a lifeless heap.

Danny felt the eyes of the dragon upon him and turned to meet the creature's penetrating glare. He could hear a deep growl, originating from somewhere within the dragon's body. It must be a warning, he was sure of it. He didn't know how or why, but this creature had protected him, now it was telling him to leave.

Out of the corner of his eye, Danny noticed movement; he turned his focus toward the black creature that had attacked him. His eyes went wide, it was getting up.

The dragon followed Danny's gaze, turned back toward him and growled again, this time much louder.

"You don't have to tell me twice," Danny whispered, no longer in shock. He quickly regained his feet and bolted for the glass doors.

Pausing in front of the doors, he retrieved his book bag from between them, passed through, and forced them shut behind him. Taking off at a dead sprint, he whipped the backpack over his shoulder just as he turned the corner. His sudden speed caused him to brush against the lockers, but it didn't slow him down.

His heart raced and his breath was heavy, but Danny didn't stop until he reached the doors at the end of the hallway. Enveloped by bright white lights, he stopped. Looking beyond the thick-paned glass, he saw the red glint of metal and recognized the compact car.

"Mom!" he yelled, pushing the doors open, practically leaping to the side of the car. He pulled on the handle, finding the car door locked. "Unlock it!" he yelled, taking a quick glance over his shoulder, half-expecting to see the shadowy creature behind him. Turning back, he pulled on the handle for the second time, his attempt coinciding with the click of the mechanism to unlock the doors. "Mom!" he yelled again, finding the door locked.

"Danny, just wait," her voice was muffled.

Risking another quick glance behind him, Danny took a deep breath. The sound of the automatic locks clicking almost caused him to jump. Exhaling, he pulled at the lever, opened the door, got in and slammed the door shut behind him.

The inside of the car was warm and welcoming as a twangy country song played on the radio.

Danny's mom looked at him with obvious disappointment. "We have a lot to talk about, young man," her tone was serious and accusing.

"I know, Mom," Danny said, looking around for anything out of the ordinary. "I know."

4

Becoming Friends with a Drake

Danny was wide-awake, still in his bed when his mother came to wake him for breakfast. With nightmarish dreams and jumbled, confused thoughts, sleep had been rather difficult.

Grounded for a week, despite attempts to explain his actions, Danny sighed and began his day.

The bus ride to school seemed normal enough, although Danny was in no mood for Alonso's stories.

Alonso simply shrugged and told his tale to someone else.

Danny was going through the motions, heading toward midday. To his surprise and relief, Steven Rooney kept his distance during gym class. Whether it was because of the white bandage on his nose or Mr. Ingram's watchful eye, Danny couldn't be sure. In either case, he was glad to be left alone for once.

"You okay, man?" Chris asked during their baseball game, the gym activity for the day.

"...Not sure," said Danny, looking at a fellow student getting ready to bat.

"Well, you sure waffle stomped Steven Rooney. I heard that was an epic fight."

"I guess," said Danny, though he wasn't thinking about Steven, his thoughts were far away. He wanted desperately to tell Chris what he'd seen the night before, yet he knew Chris would never believe him. Danny wasn't quite sure if he believed it himself.

"I guess?" mimicked Chris. "You broke his nose, man. The story has been going around school all morning. Heck, I just found out myself. I'm surprised you didn't call me to tell me last night."

Danny turned and looked at Chris. Danny could see that he'd hurt Chris's feelings. They *were* best friends, after all. "I'm sorry," said Danny with a shrug. "I just, have a lot on my mind right now."

"Hey, I understand. I get the same way after a wrestling match. It's easy to second-guess yourself," said Chris with a comforting smile.

After gym, Danny skulked his way to science class, noticing that he seemed to be the center of attention. Everyone looked at him with a mixture of fear and awe. Danny didn't feel like a hero, as the day went on, he began to feel more and more awkward. It was not what he had expected.

Science class ended with Danny in a daze. He was so focused on the events of the previous day that he didn't even acknowledge Sabrina Drake, she was sitting right next to him.

The bell chimed, echoing through the small science lab, marking the end of the period.

Still going through the motions, Danny placed his science book back into his backpack, got up, and left the room. Lost in his own thoughts, he almost failed to hear Matt call out.

"Danny, wait up!"

In a dazed state, Danny stopped and waited for his friend.

"Are you okay?"

"Yea, I guess so."

"Stephen Rooney, wish I could've seen that. How'd you pull that off?"

Danny turned and continued down the short hall, Matt followed him. "I wish I knew."

Before Matt could continue, Danny heard his name uttered lovingly by Sabrina Drake.

"Danny Firoth," she said in a soft alluring tone, materializing out of the crowd.

Danny held the door open and allowed her to breeze past him.

"Thank you," she said with a slight smile, the faint aroma of wild roses followed in her wake. "That's the second time you've held the door open for me," she said, flicking her long black hair back behind her shoulders.

Stunned by this sudden interaction, Danny nodded.

"Would you walk me to my locker?" Sabrina asked him, reaching out, grabbing Danny's right hand with her left. Pulling him gently, she urged Danny into submission.

The slight contact sent a shiver down Danny's spine. His previous distracting thoughts vanished quickly as he focused on one thing and one thing only—Sabrina Drake.

"I'll catch up with you later, Danny," Matt said, as if sensing Danny's sudden distraction.

"...Yeah, later." He followed Sabrina up the stairs, his eyes never leaving her back.

At the top of the stairs, she relinquished her hold on him, strode through the threshold, and into the hall. "Do you need to go to your locker first?" she asked, stopping, turning to face him.

With the soft touch of her hand fading, Danny refocused. "Um, no," his voice quivered, showing his nervousness.

"Okay," she said with a gleeful smile, "my locker is on the other side of the school, near the cafeteria."

"Oh, okay," as if he didn't already know—he'd scoped out the location of her locker on the second day of school. His stalking behavior had become a ritual after science class; he always took the long way to his own locker so that he could follow Sabrina to hers. He'd never expected that she'd invite him to walk with her.

Sabrina looked at him curiously, as if waiting for something. "You coming?"

"Uh, yeah," his tone rose two octaves.

"So, you broke Steven Rooney's nose, huh?" Sabrina asked, gracefully weaving through a mass of fellow students.

"So you heard about that, didn't you?" feeling stupid for answering her question with a question. He followed her through the crowded hall.

"Actually, I saw it," Sabrina said with a smile. "I was standing on the sidewalk by the bus. It was strange. You moved as if you knew what Steven was going to do."

"Yeah, I was pretty lucky," still finding the event quite strange himself.

"Yeah," agreed Sabrina. She squinted at him for a second but the look disappeared as she replaced it with a smile. Two small dimples appeared in the corners of her mouth as her lips creased the soft skin of her face.

The pair rounded the corner, walking past the office.

"This is mine," said Sabrina, stopping in front of an olive-colored locker.

"Oh," Danny said, trying to act surprised. "It must be nice to have a locker located more or less in the middle of the school."

"Yeah, it is," twisting the combination lock, opening the slender metal door with a clang.

While trying to think of something clever to say, Danny heard the warning bell through the intercom. He'd have to hurry if he wanted to get his books before class; he didn't want to be late.

"I just forgot—I need to go to my locker," said Danny, starting to walk backward down the hall.

"Okay," said Sabrina, throwing another hypnotic smile his way.

Danny was about to turn and run when Sabrina's yell stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Hey!"

Danny turned back patiently.

"I have choir practice after school. Do you want to stay and hang out after? You can even come and watch me if you want."

"Sure," knowing that his mother had grounded him, he couldn't pass on this once in a lifetime opportunity, no matter what might happen later.

"Meet me at my locker after school," finished Sabrina, throwing a red book in her bag. She shut the locker, waved, then disappeared into the flow of the crowded hall.

Danny's heart fluttered as he turned and ran. Feeling light as a feather, he leapt down the stairs that led to his locker, taking them two at a time. He passed through a pair of double green doors and as he rounded the corner, Danny felt a profound exhilaration. Twisting the combination lock, Danny found it hard to concentrate—his thoughts remained on the past few moments he'd just spent with Sabrina Drake. Finishing the ritual, he opened his locker, grabbed his history book and bounded off to class. Unfortunately, the tardy bell rang seconds before he passed through the doorway.

"You are late, Mr. Firoth," said Mrs. Hershberger, jabbing the air with her finger. Older than most of the teachers, Mrs. Hershberger wore a wig of curly, thin hair the color of silver, she sported a pair of bifocals with thick lenses and always dressed in the fashion of her generation, whenever that might have been.

Danny nodded, "Yes, Mrs. Hershberger." Under the current circumstances, Danny couldn't care less. He felt amazing. As he took his seat, he could still feel his heart beating a mile a minute.

Daydreaming of the events to come, the rest of the school day went faster than Danny ever thought possible. Before he knew it, the final bell rang, signaling the end of art class and school.

Danny gathered up his belongings and made straight for his locker. He organized his homework, gathered his books into his backpack and finished in record time. Slamming the locker shut, he made his way up to Sabrina's locker.

He waited for five minutes, no sign of her. Five minutes more, still he waited. A few minutes later, he spotted her as she rounded the corner, looked

up and smiled at him. Again, his heart fluttered, his breath caught in his chest and his palms began to sweat.

At some point, during the past three classes, she had gathered her black hair up into a tight ponytail and draped it delicately over her right shoulder.

"How long have you been standing there?" Sabrina asked, dialing the combination of her locker.

Danny shrugged, "About a minute," he said, lying.

"So, are you going to be okay if you don't take the bus?" Sabrina said, as she opened her locker door.

"Yeah, I live fairly close. I can walk home. How are you going to get home?"

Sabrina smiled, rifled through her book bag and produced a silver phone. "I can call my father, he can pick me up."

"Oh."

"I could give you a ride home, if you like?"

"Sure, that would be nice."

Hefting her bag over her shoulder, Sabrina closed the locker and walked down the hall toward the choir room, Danny walked beside her.

Danny found a seat out of the way and watched devotedly as Sabrina took her position at the base of the elevated stand. During practice, Danny concentrated on singling her out, he decided that her singing was easily the most wonderful sound he'd ever heard.

As soon as choir practice ended, Sabrina smiled, said her goodbyes and approached Danny. "You ready to go?"

Danny stood, nodded and said, "You have an amazing voice."

Sabrina flushed at the compliment, her creamy cheeks turning a soft red. "Thanks," she said, swiveling on her right foot, causing her ponytail to whip around behind her. Turning, she eyed Danny with a focused intensity, her bold eyes pierced him.

Together, the pair turned the corner and walked down the hall, side by side. They left through the pair of glass doors at the front of the school, rounded the small elementary school building and headed toward a large, fenced-in playground, complete with teeter-totters, basketball equipment, swings and a rounded set of monkey bars that jutted up from the ground in a half-globe.

Sabrina took off at a slow jog and planted her right foot on the first steel bar that made up the base of the spherical jungle gym. Hand over hand, she climbed to the top and stood daringly at the summit.

Danny followed her, but instead of climbing he slipped between the bars and eyed Sabrina from beneath.

"Can I ask you a question, Danny?" she asked, staring down at him.

At that moment, she could've asked him anything and he would've answered without hesitation. "Sure."

"Do you believe in dragons?"

Danny looked down in confusion. The question left him dumbstruck. He did believe in dragons—now more than ever; he had seen one with his own eyes. However, he wondered if she would think he was odd or dumb if he answered her truthfully. This day was beyond amazing, Danny didn't want to ruin it by sounding stupid.

"Well?" said Sabrina softly.

Her musical voice yanked him from his trance. Danny gazed up at her.

"Yes, I believe in dragons."

Sabrina's mouth parted in a slight smile that quickly vanished as she hunkered down, her facial expression turning serious. "Do you believe in the Dark?"

Again, the question stirred memories of the night before, the dark creature with red eyes had haunted his nightmares. "What do you mean?"

Sabrina leaned down farther, "True darkness, a malevolent force whose only goal is to destroy all life as we know it."

The statement, so bold and imposing, caused Danny to shudder. He'd seen just such determination in the gaze of the dark creature the night before. "Why are you asking me this?"

The sky rumbled as if answering Danny's question. The once-white clouds turned dark, blotching out the comforting amber rays of the setting sun. The gloomy clouds began to swirl, producing a wind tunnel.

"What's happening?" Danny asked. A jagged bolt of lightning jutted out from within the whirling storm, perhaps a warning.

Before Sabrina could answer Danny's question, something shadowy and sinister fell from within the tempest, leaving a trail of billowing black smoke through the sky. Landing soundlessly on the ground, the dark smolder swelled outward in a wave.

Peering into the ominous haze, Danny came out from under the bars of the jungle gym. Taking two bars at a time, Sabrina climbed down and stood beside him.

The wind picked up, its strong breeze dissipated the murky mist, revealing a slender silhouette beneath. Thin red eyes flashed within the gloom as the creature took a silent step forward. The thing smiled, revealing a wicked array of sharp, silvery teeth.

Danny's breath caught in his chest. He knew this creature. It looked exactly like the monster he had seen the night before. However, this time there was no dragon to protect him. "Get behind me!" Danny yelled, pushing Sabrina behind him with his right hand, while he stepped in front of her.

In the distance, the shadowed creature stalked beyond the veil of black smoke. Its hands twitched with anticipation as a set of razor-sharp fingernails extended to the length of daggers.

"No, *you* get behind me!" Sabrina yelled, her voice lost its melodic timbre, it turned deep and throaty. Stepping beside him, she pressed her left palm to his chest, she pushed him backward with a sudden surge of strength that Danny would've never thought her capable of.

Danny landed roughly on his rump ten feet behind her. However, before he could comment, his eyes were drawn to Sabrina, her body began to glow.

Taking on the characteristics of the sun itself, Sabrina emanated a brilliant amber light. A pair of beautiful wings sprouted from her back. Her arms and legs extended to impossible lengths, bulging with masses of lithe muscle. Her neck stretched and a nimble tail blossomed from the base of her back. Rosy red scales completed the transformation.

Danny looked at the fully-formed dragon that stood where Sabrina had been only an instant before.

"It was you," he said after stepping back to what he thought would be a safe distance. "You're... you're the dragon," jabbing his finger in her general direction.

The dragon angled its snake-like neck in Danny's direction and eyed him, unblinking. Sabrina's soft brown eyes, now larger, with a slit pupil like that of a lizard, narrowed, as if in warning.

Seeing its chance, the dark creature took two quick lunges forward and bounded into the air.

"Look out!" Danny yelled, seeing the creature's movements in his peripheral vision, pointing.

Lightning-fast, the dragon swiveled its head. Letting out a low, rumbling growl, Sabrina planted her front claws in the ground and thrashed the back of her body forward. The sudden movement caused her elongated tail to whip behind her, catching the creature in the torso, flinging it back through the air.

The creature tumbled end over end before colliding with the far fence. The chain link fence groaned and warped before pitching the creature to the ground, where it remained slumped forward.

"Is it dead?"

Sabrina returned her gaze to him and shook her scaled head side-to-side, suggesting that the answer was no.

The fence jingled, drawing Danny's attention, Sabrina followed his frightful gaze.

The creature pulled itself upright, its thin claws scraping across the metal fence, like fingernails screeching against a chalkboard. The sound sent shudders down Danny's spine.

The creature of shadow stood up, squared its stance and bounded forward, angling around for another head-on attack.

In response, Sabrina planted her front claws deep into the ground and made ready.

Panicking, Danny scanned the ground. He picked up a palm-sized stone and hefted it in his right hand, testing the weight. Hauling back, he chucked the rock with all his might, sending the stone hurtling through the air.

The creature didn't even attempt to dodge it as it charged forward with an inhuman speed.

Danny's aim remained true, but the stone passed harmlessly through the creature's head, causing its smoky skin to ripple where the rock had failed to touch it.

"That's impossible."

The stone sailed through the air, losing its speed, tumbling across the ground.

Once more, Sabrina squared her shoulders and twisted her torso, causing her long tail to lash out a second time.

In response, the creature leapt into the air in a shallow arc just above Sabrina's swift attack, causing her tail to come in contact nothing but the wind. The creature twisted in the air, completing one full rotation before thrashing out as it fell within striking distance of Sabrina's back. The creature's long silver claws raked against the pink scales of Sabrina's right shoulder, shedding a bright display of sparks.

With a roar of anger and anguish, Sabrina swatted the creature with a wicked backhand, catching it full in the face. The impact sent the shadow tumbling end over end, across the ground, skidding to a stop a good twenty feet from where it had started. Bounding into the air, Sabrina closed the distance in the blink of an eye. Standing above the creature, she pinned it to the ground with her front left claw. Her talons sank deep into the soil, holding the shadow tight. With one final growl, she scraped her right claw across the creature. Each individual talon left a distinct line as it tore through the murky flesh.

Torn into six separate pieces, the parts of the creature began to hiss as they dissolved into a dark mist before disappearing, carried away by the wind.

"Is it... dead... now?"

Sabrina turned and padded toward him, moving with a subtle limp.

Danny retreated from her, wary of her size.

Sabrina answered his question by bobbing her head up and down.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a dragon?"

Ignoring the question, Sabrina angled her long, slender neck around to get a closer look at her right shoulder. Four precise cuts ran down the base of her arm from shoulder to elbow.

"Are you okay?" worry evident in his voice.

Ignoring him, Sabrina licked at the wounds, her tongue slender and forked like that of a snake.

"Don't ignore me," Danny said, finding some backbone.

Sabrina angled her head back toward him, growled softly and snorted forcefully in his face.

Taken aback, Danny stumbled backward and tripped over a small rock, landing on his rear.

Taking a deep breath, Sabrina closed her eyes and bowed her head. Her scales began to shimmer, her limbs shortened, her neck compacted and her tail shriveled up behind her, disappearing without a trace. Once the transformation was complete, Sabrina opened her eyes and released her breath.

Danny stared at her in disbelief.

"I wasn't ignoring you." Sabrina walked toward her book bag, picked it up and put on her shoulder. "I am unable to talk when I am in that form."

"You're a dragon," Danny said, watching in wide-eyed amazement as she walked over and plopped down beside him.

"I am not a dragon," rifling through her pack, pulling out her phone. "I am a Drake."

"What's the difference?"

Sabrina held up her hand and depressed a button on the phone, a low-toned beep followed. Holding the phone to her ear, she kept her hand in the air, silently asking for continued silence.

"Father, there was another one... yes, he is with me."

"Is that..."

Before Danny could finish his question, Sabrina silenced him with a definitive look. "Yes, Father, we are okay," she said into the phone. "We are still at school, behind the elementary building in the playground area."

Danny had no choice but to wait, as he tapped his foot impatiently.

"Okay, my father is coming to pick us up."

"What's happening? What was that thing? What are you?" Danny asked in a rush, losing his cool.

"Just calm down."

"Calm down? How can I calm down when..."

"I am a Drake."

Danny took a breath and calmed himself a little. "...A Drake?"

"A pureblood Dragonic is born from the union of two pureblood dragons, I am the daughter of a pureblood Dragonic, my father, and a Human, my mother. Therefore, I am a Drake and not a dragon. Drake is the name given to those of half-Dragon blood."

"So... your last name?"

"...Was chosen by my father. Dragonic society, unlike Human society, does not use last names. So, he chose the obvious in order for me to blend in with your race."

"...And that thing you just killed?"

"It's a Shadow," she probed her right shoulder with her left hand. "...A creature from the darkest void." When she pulled her hand away from her shoulder, it was slick with blood.

"You're still hurt!" Danny said, getting up, kneeling beside her. Tearing off a piece of his shirt, he wrapped the makeshift bandage around her wounds as best he could. "You mean a Shadow, like in the game of Knights?" Danny asked, tying the wrap tightly over her right shoulder, under her armpit.

"Yes," said Sabrina, wincing as Danny knotted the bandage tight with one final tug.

"Done."

Sabrina turned to inspect his work. "Thank you," she said with an approving smile.

Danny slumped back down. "So... the cards in the game are real?"

"Yes. The order of the Light believes that the card game allows those with the gift of sight to be more accepting of the knowledge of the Dark."

"Gift of sight?"

"Normal Humans are not able to see Shadows," explained Sabrina, looking off into the sunset. "You have the gift, Danny, or a curse, depending on how you look at it."

"How could this be a curse?"

Sabrina looked down, her eyes growing distant. After a moment, she spoke. "There is a saying, 'When you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.' What you have seen, Danny, you cannot un-see. You have seen them, and they have seen you."

"But you killed it, didn't you?"

"What you saw this day and the night before was merely the puppet of a larger foe."

"What should I do now?"

"Well, that is for you to decide for yourself, but you can start by helping me up," said Sabrina, extending her left hand.

Danny stood up and obliged, pulling Sabrina to her feet.

"Get your book bag, Father will be here soon. As a knight of the order, he will be able to answer your questions far better than I ever could."

"Really?" Danny asked. His voice jumped an octave in his excitement. "What's his name?"

"His name is Tyramear," said Sabrina with a smile.



Into the Light

The sun had just crept below the horizon when a silver car pulled into view. The wind had grown cold; it whistled with the intent to chill.

Danny followed Sabrina hesitantly as she walked toward the car. On the opposite side, a tall, slender man opened the car door and stepped into view.

His hair, long and silvery, draped down the slope of his neck. He wore a form-fitting, silver pinstriped suit. Walking around the front of the car, he slung a silver-hilted blade over his shoulder, sheathed in an ornate scabbard. The hilt formed a grand dragon, the head and neck making up the pommel and the wings outstretched to form the hand guards. Holding a piece of black leather tied around the sheath with his left hand, he allowed the longsword to rest against his back with the hilt peeking over his shoulder. His eyes were as blue as the sky.

"Are you okay, my daughter?" he asked, stopping within touching distance of Sabrina, examining the bindings on her right shoulder.

"Yes, Father."

Danny had noticed that since their encounter with the Shadow, Sabrina's carefree playful demeanor had become more serious and focused. He had the distinct impression that he was seeing her true personality for the first time.

"I would like to introduce you to Danny Firoth, Father," as she motioned Danny closer with a flick of her left hand.

Danny stepped closer to the towering man, unable to meet his steady gaze.

"Greetings, Danny Firoth," said Sabrina's father, unaffected by Danny's shyness. "I am Tyramear, Dragonic Knight of the Light, pureblood of the Dragonic." He presented his right hand in greeting.

Danny hesitated before reaching out as Tyramear reached past Danny's hand and grabbed his arm at the wrist. Unsure of the gesture, Danny did the same and winced from the strength of the grip.

"You have a strong grip, young Firoth, but we have much to talk about and little time to dawdle. Come with me," releasing his grasp, turning toward the car, he opened the door for his daughter.

"Wait a minute," Danny said to himself more than anyone else, while unslinging the pack from his back and digging through the contents. He pulled out a slightly worn card. The picture portrayed a huge, silver-scaled dragon, captured in the moment of breathing a billowing cloud of blue flame. The caption at the top of the card read, *Tyramear, Dragonic Knight of the Light*, in bold black letters. Holding the card up in front of him, he compared the picture to Sabrina's father, switching his focus between the two several times.

"This is you," his voice jumping in pitch.

Sabrina's father stepped forward and took the card from Danny's outstretched hand. Rubbing the point of his chin, he examined the card for a few moments. "It's not a bad likeness, but they got my stature wrong." Handing the card back to Danny and smiling, he added, "I'm much bigger in real life."

"Are you coming or what?" Sabrina asked.

Yanked out of his daze, Danny nodded, put the card back in his book bag and walked toward the car. Once inside, Sabrina's father closed the door behind him. The car was warm and comforting, a welcome change from the frigid air outside. He watched as Sabrina's father walked around the front of the car, got in and secured the silver blade in the backseat beside Danny.

"Here," said Sabrina's father, swiveling in his seat, extending a silver phone. "You should call your mother."

"What should I tell her?"

"You can try to tell her the truth or you can lie," said Tyramear. "Both will be difficult, but it is your choice."

He turned the ignition, the car to roared to life.

Phone in hand, Danny slumped back in the seat and eyed the silver blade resting next to him. Taking a deep breath, he dialed his mother.

The phone rang twice before his mother picked up. She sounded worried and angry. Danny explained to her that he'd stayed after school to study with

Sabrina, and that he was going to her house to study some more. His mother seemed surprised at the mention of Sabrina, happy that her son had made a new friend, obviously angry that he had not come home right after school. Danny implied that his need for knowledge was dire, which wasn't too far from the truth, given the current circumstances. In the end, she agreed to let him go as long as he was home on by nine o'clock.

Saying his goodbyes, Danny ended the call, handed the phone back to Sabrina's father, "Thank you."

Tyramear prompted his daughter to tell the tale of the attack.

During Sabrina's explanation, Danny's eyes lingered on the sword. He decided to take a closer look at it.

Looking closer, he noticed fine details, engraved on the tip of the silver sheath was a winding path of vines, mesmerizing in their intricate design. The twisting plants turned to roots as they traveled up the scabbard, becoming the base of a towering tree with the symbol of Light pictured in the leafy canopy. The base of the dragon-hilted blade, constructed from some silver-colored metal, matched up perfectly with the lip of the sheath.

Drawn to the reflecting glint of the polished metal, Danny reached out to touch it, his hand lingering just beyond the hilt.

"I would not do that if I were you," said Sabrina's father.

Danny's hand stopped just a few inches from the surface of the sword.

"Silvear is a Bonded, and a Bonded does not take kindly to being touched by one who is not their wielder," explained Tyramear.

"...A Bonded?"

"Yes," said Tyramear, his voice calm, seemingly content to let Danny guess at the implication.

Danny quickly went through his backpack and pulled out his deck box. In the card game of Knights, Bondeds were special weapons that could only be used by certain Knights of the Light. In the game, a Bonded card was useless when paired with just *any* knight card; it would often cause harmful disadvantages. However, if used with the knight named upon the card, it would grant special abilities and powers. Danny had a few in his deck, matching pairs were hard to come by.

Sabrina's father had just implied that a Bonded had a mind of its own, Danny rubbed his head in confusion.

"We are here," said Tyramear, before Danny could question him further.

Shoving his deck back into the box, Danny looked out of the car window. The full moon bathed the two-story house in a revealing light. The driveway led up to a two-car garage and looped around the back of the house. Danny saw the backyard quickly, it stretched out farther than his eyes could see. On either side of the drive, there were vast fields of withering corn stalks, suggesting that

the location of the home was well away from the bustle of town and prying eyes.

The car stopped just in front of the garage. Turning around, Sabrina's father reached back, retrieved Silvear, "Come, Danny, we have a lot to discuss."

Danny nodded as he opened the car door. He followed Sabrina and her father silently as they made their way around the front of the house and onto the porch.

Sabrina's father unlocked the front door, held it open and motioned Danny and Sabrina inside.

Upon entering, Danny was greeted with the warm smile of a tall woman. Thin and straight, her long black hair cascaded down and around the nape of her neck. The shape of her eyes and her creamy skin mimicked her daughter's Asian heritage as she nodded her head and regarded Danny with a gentle gaze. However, her tender welcoming expression quickly turned to concern as her green eyes spotted the red-soaked bandage wrapped around Sabrina's right shoulder.

"You're hurt," said the woman, moving to Sabrina's side, investigating the wound.

"It's not that bad, Mother."

"Allow me to introduce you to my wife, Moon Su-Dae Drake." Sabrina's father closed the front door. "Moon, this is Danny Firoth."

Moon turned toward Danny and smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Danny," she said curtly. "Come, let me have a look," she said to her daughter, dragging her up a set of stairs.

"Moon is a nurse," explained Tyramear, "but more than that, she has the healer's touch."

"...Healer's touch?"

"Sabrina's mother has the ability to heal with the use of magic in addition to modern medicine." Seeing Danny's surprise, Tyramear added, "I understand that this is all very new to you. The answers will come soon, I promise, but first would you like something to drink? I make great hot chocolate."

"That would be fine," answered Danny, hoping he didn't look as uncomfortable as he felt. More than anything, he felt excited.

"Good," said Tyramear, slinging his sword over his shoulder. "Please make yourself comfortable."

After Tyramear left, Danny investigated the room with acute curiosity.

The large room boasted a vaulted ceiling and cream-colored walls. Arranged in a circle were a wooden rocking chair, a white sofa, and a red loveseat. However, the room lacked one thing usually common to most living rooms, a television.

Danny made his way to the sofa and sat down. Unsure of his surroundings, unwilling to touch anything that might get him into trouble, he placed his hands in his lap.

A few minutes later, Tyramear appeared with a pair of steaming mugs. He handed one to Danny, then walked over to the loveseat, propped his silver blade against the edge, and sat down.

The cup was warm in Danny's hands, filled three-quarters of the way to the brim, it was topped with a layer of whipped cream and marshmallows. The taste was hot on the tip of his tongue, but soothing as it glided down his throat, warming his belly. It was the best hot chocolate Danny had ever tasted.

"Good?" Tyramear asked.

Danny nodded eagerly conveying that it tasted great; he took another sip.

"Well then... I suppose we should get to it," said Tyramear. He took a sip of his own and then placed his mug on a side table.

Danny shifted to the edge of his seat and held his cup snugly between his legs. He was already in awe of this man, a full-blooded dragon, a Knight of the Light, and best of all he had his own card in the game of Knights. Additionally, he was also Sabrina's father. If Tyramear claimed that the world was flat, Danny would've believed him without question.

"A few hundred years ago, a rift of unknown origin opened at a large island, White Rock, located just off the coasts of Florida, Puerto Rico and Bermuda, in the center of what you know as the Bermuda Triangle. The fissure released the first wave of a dark race we came to call Shadows, resulting in a war that raged on for seven long years. With the help of great heroes and the loss of many brave souls, we were able to halt the passage of the Shadows into our world."

"You mean you were there?" Danny's face distorted with wide-eyed amazement.

"We Dragonic live much longer than a Human lifetime," explained Tyramear. He dropped his head as if he were grieving. "Yes, I was there. However, one turned the tide—the Mageknight."

"The Mageknight," whispered Danny to himself.

"Yes, the first and only one of his kind; as far as we know anyway. It is said that he will return when the days turn the darkest, his powers will be reborn in the body of another." Looking up, Tyramear snapped out of his reverie. "Forgive me; I seem to have trailed off."

Enthralled, Danny held his tongue.

"From the ashes of this battle, the Order of Light was born. We became the silent guardians of the Eye of Darkness."

"...The Eye of Darkness?"

"Such is the name we gave to the rift that opened that fateful day so long ago. It is a swirling mass leading into the abyss of the Shadow home world,"

said Tyramear. "The most powerful of wizards, as well as the strongest of knights, have attempted to close it, but to no avail. The Eye is a stain upon this world, resulting in a warping of reality itself. It is the cause of the strange occurrences for which the Bermuda Triangle is well known."

"If that is the only way for Shadows to enter our world, then how'd one end up at the playground at the school today?"

Tyramear nodded, smiled, and said, "A good question. It seems you are bright as well as brave." After a moment, he continued. "The Knights of the Light have waged war upon the Shadows since their intrusion into this world. However, there are those that would aid their incursion. With the help of those of the Dark, the Shadows have found other ways of trespassing into our world. That is why I was assigned by the Order of Light to protect this area. Oddly, there has been a significant amount of Shadow activity in this region."

"What do they want?"

"Ultimately, they wish to claim this world for their own and drown it in eternal darkness. However, what they currently desire within this particular area is unknown to me."

"Why would anyone help them?"

"The Shadows control dark powerful forces. Such power is difficult for some to deny when it is promised so easily."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"A brave thought-provoking question, Danny, one that only you can answer," said Tyramear, scooting to the edge of his seat. "As you already know, the deck of cards that you carry in your bag is a window into the struggle I have just spoken of. For those without the gift of sight, it is simply a way to pass the time. However, for others like you, it is a training tool. You ask me what this has to do with you. The answer is either nothing or everything. You can decide to ignore the things that you have seen and go about your life, but be forewarned, they will not ignore you. Or you can embrace this gift, you can train to become a Knight of the Light and protect the innocent from the threat of the Dark."

At that moment, before Danny could answer, Sabrina descended the stairs, her mother following behind. Danny and Tyramear stood and turned to look at the newcomers.

"I hope we're not interrupting anything?"

"Not at all," said Tyramear with a smile.

"Are you alright?" Danny asked of Sabrina.

Sabrina shrugged and pulled up the sleeve of her white T-shirt, revealing the unblemished skin of her right arm and her shoulder. The wound from her fight with the Shadow was completely gone, as if it had never happened. "Mother is an amazing healer," she said, reading Danny's surprised expression.

Moon smiled at the mention of her abilities.

Turning toward her father, Sabrina asked, "Has he decided yet?"

"I am afraid we were just in the middle of discussing that, my daughter."

"How does one become a Knight of the Light?"

Tyramear was the first to oblige him. "There is a school, Danny, located on White Rock Island. Those with the gift of sight are trained in the ways of the Light. Taught the art of combat, it is there that one becomes a knight."

Danny resumed his seated position and put both hands on his head. He felt overwhelmed. "I don't believe this is happening."

"It is a lot to take in," said Tyramear, closing the distance between them, placing a reassuring hand on Danny's right shoulder.

"You two must be starved. I will go and finish what I started for dinner," said Moon before disappearing into the kitchen.

Sabrina moved to Danny's side and took his left hand in hers.

Shocked at the sudden contact, Danny looked up.

Smiling, Sabrina said, "I cannot really understand what you are going through, Danny, because I was born into this knowledge."

"I'll do it," said Danny after a moment of thought, as he locked onto Sabrina's soft brown eyes.

"Do not do it for her," said Tyramear with a slight chuckle. "This decision must be made of your own accord. You must not let any outside influence force your hand."

"I'm positive," said Danny, turning to face Tyramear. "I want to be a Knight of the Light."

"So be it, Danny Firoth," said Tyramear with a gentle smile. "I shall petition the Council of the Knights for you to be tested."

"...Tested?"

Tyramear held his smile. "Like any other school, there are certain requirements you must meet to be accepted. Should you pass these tests, your enrollment will be guaranteed."

"What kind of requirements?"

"The details of the trials are forbidden to those destined to be examined," said Tyramear. "The testing is something you must either pass or fail on your own. Neither I nor Sabrina will be able to help you." He eyed his daughter sternly.

"How long do I have?"

"A few months, perhaps," said Tyramear. "The Shadows' movements have become increasingly bold and the Light is ever busy."

Danny dropped his gaze, worried. He was terrible at tests, not knowing what to study made it that much more difficult.

"Do not fret," said Tyramear, seemingly reading his thoughts.

Danny suddenly wondered if it was in the power of a full-blooded Dragonic to read minds. He stared at Tyramear with one raised eyebrow.

"No, I cannot read your mind," said Tyramear with a smile, but your expression is as readable as an open book."

Danny smiled and scratched the top of his head. "It's just that... I'm terrible at tests."

"This is no test that you can study for. You are as prepared for it right now, as you will be when you are destined to take it. Try not to worry."

Before Danny could say anything else, Moon called from the kitchen, "Dinner is ready." Her words heralded the aroma of something delicious, causing Danny's mouth to water.

"Come, Danny. Not only is Moon a gifted healer, she is also an amazing cook."

After a dinner of hibachi-style chicken, egg rolls, and fluffy white rice, keeping in the tradition of Moon's Korean heritage, Danny said his goodbye to Sabrina and her mother. With the hour getting late, he was grateful when Tyramear offered to drive him home.

Before he started the car, Tyramear produced a long, thin object, wrapped in a velvety red cloth.

"I have something for you," holding the cloaked item in the palm of his hand.

Danny took it, he could feel the weight of something heavy and solid.

Starting the car, Tyramear turned around. Shifting gears, he said, "Go ahead, open it."

Danny un-wrapped the red cloth, one fold at a time, revealing the splendor of polished metal. He was looking at a slender dagger sheathed in a silver scabbard, with the symbol of Light engraved into the middle. The hilt of the small blade resembled the head of a dragon. Danny held the brand up to his eyes to get a better look at it, he gasped at the intricate artisanship.

"Take it out," urged Tyramear, as he navigated the long driveway.

Danny wrapped his fingers around the base of the hilt. The metal was cool in his hands as he pulled the blade free with a slight ring of steel. The moment the naked edge left the scabbard, it bathed the car in a soft white light.

"It's beautiful, thank you," said Danny, admiring the sharp blade as it glowed with a pale luminescence.

"It is for your protection," said Tyramear before Danny could ask. "You must keep it on your person at all times."

"I can't take this to school," argued Danny, holding the dagger before him, raising both eyebrows in question.

"It is enchanted. Those without the gift of sight, will see a common ink pen. It is imperative that you keep it with you at all times. Without it, you will be helpless against a Shadow attack."

"...Helpless?"

"The Shadows are creatures of magic. They can only be destroyed by magic. Crafted with Dwarvin skill, the dagger in your hand is charmed for the specific purpose of felling Shadows."

"Charmed?"

"It is magical. Only magical weapons can harm a Shadow. Mortal weapons are useless against their kind."

"So that's why the rock went right through the Shadow's head."

"Yes," affirmed Tyramear.

"Then how could Sabrina hurt it? She wasn't using any kind of weapon that I could see."

Tyramear smiled and took his eyes off the road to look at Danny. "Like me, Sabrina is of the Dragonic, dragons are naturally magical creatures."

"Oh," said Danny, pausing for a moment while thumbing the engraved symbol of Light upon the scabbard of the dagger, a solid white chain interlinked with a black chain of seeping dark flames. "What does the symbol of Light stand for?" he was mesmerized by the emblem.

Tyramear followed Danny's captivated gaze down to the small sheath. "At the core, the symbol is meant to represent a balance of a sort, a union between both good and evil." Glancing at the road and then at Danny, he continued. "You see... good cannot exist without evil and vice versa. The white chain represents the Light, the forces of good, while the black chain represents evil, the forces of the Dark. The white chain is solid and pure because we of the Light acknowledge the presence of the Dark and strive to maintain the proper balance. However, the black chain, warped with escaping tendrils of dark flame, symbolizes the Dark's desire to overthrow that balance. Evil does not know boundaries, Danny. The forces of the Dark will work tirelessly to unravel everything, even at the risk of their own destruction."

"I see," said Danny, tracing his pointer finger around the circular symbol of the Light. Tyramear's words settled heavily upon his shoulders.

"If I am going to get you home, I will need your guidance from this point on," said Tyramear, turning his full attention back toward the road.

Forced from the burden of his thoughts, Danny nodded, sheathed the dagger, and gave him directions.

6

The Gift of Sight

Danny awoke to the sound of his mother's scolding and sighed as he fought the urge to try to go back to sleep.

"Come on, Danny, get up, you're going to be late for school!"

The night had passed slowly, sleep had refused to come and had only found him a few hours before he had to awaken. The events of the past few days haunted his thoughts and invaded his dreams, causing him more nightmares.

Throwing the blanket from his body, Danny wondered if everything had just been a bad dream, or a really good dream depending upon the point of view, but moving his pillow aside, finding the dragon-hilted dagger beneath it, he knew differently.

After a final warning from his mother, Danny got up, dressed and began his morning routine. Bursting through the front door with his right shoe halfway on, the bus was just about to pull away. With a shout and a wave, he halted its departure. Securing the dagger under his belt, he bolted for the bus.

He found a seat toward the back, sat down and sighed. Pulling the sheathed dagger free from his belt, he caressed the cool metal with his thumb, admiring the intricacies of its design.

The bus squeaked to a stop but Danny failed to notice anything because he was so engrossed with the gift from Tyramear. Seconds later, Alonso plopped down beside him.

"Wow, is that what I think it is?" his blue eyes were wide with awe.

Surprised, Danny swiveled in his seat and yanked the dagger behind his back. "If you think it's just a normal ink pen, then yes, it is what you think it is," said Danny, faking a smile.

"No, it wasn't," said Alonso, shaking his head. "That was a knife." Beckoning with his right hand, "Let me see it."

From the seat in front of them, a head peered over the hump. Danny recognized Michael Swaft, a plump boy with black hair trimmed in the shape of an upside-down bowl.

"You brought a knife to school, Danny?" Michael asked in a booming voice.

"No, I—" Danny tried to explain, but before he could come up with an answer, the bus ground to a halt.

Moments later, the bus driver stood over all three boys, glaring in Danny's direction. "Who has a knife?"

Michael and Alonso turned toward Danny, singling him out. Danny appeared to be the most likely culprit with his hand still behind his back.

"What's behind your back, Danny Firoth?" the bus driver asked, stabbing her pointer finger through the air.

Sighing, Danny took his arm from behind his back and presented the object in question.

"Is this some kind of joke, Danny?"

"No, Ms. Virginia."

"It's just a pen," said Michael Swaft, pointing out the obvious.

"No, it's not. It's a..."

"That's enough," said the bus driver, interrupting Alonso. "Bringing weapons on the bus is no laughing matter. I suggest you keep that in mind and refrain from such pranks in the future." Without waiting for Alonso's smart reply, the bus driver turned and stormed back to the front of the bus.

"But..."

Danny's arm shot out; he covered Alonso's mouth with his left hand before the boy could blurt out anything else. Placing the dagger on his lap, he held his finger to his lips indicating the need for silence.

Alonso's eyes narrowed in anger, but he nodded that he understood.

Once the bus resumed its course with a hum of the motor, Danny spoke softly. "You can see the dagger?" holding the object in question before him.

"Why did Michael and Ms. Virginia think it was a pen?"

Danny looked around to see if anyone else was eavesdropping. "I can't tell you anything here." After a moment of thought, he continued, "Can you meet me after school?"

Alonso nodded.

"Okay, meet me in front of the library after last period."

The bus stopped in front of the school.

"I'll see you after school, Danny, and I expect an explanation," Alonso said as both boys parted ways.

Danny sighed, making his way to the front entrance. Navigating the halls, he sighed again, this time with relief. Sabrina stood at her locker, placing a brown math book in her bag. Danny scurried to her left side and slumped against the lockers.

"Hey, Danny," said Sabrina, turning to look at him.

She seemed different from last night, carefree and light as opposed to focused and heavy. Danny concluded that this was her disguise.

"I think there's something you should know," said Danny after a moment of hesitation.

"What's up?" the silky skin of her cheeks creased in a smile.

"Alonso Martinez has the gift of sight as well."

Sabrina did a double-take, looked in either direction and slammed her locker shut. Dragging Danny by the arm, she shoved him into a corner by the stairs. "Are you sure?" her once-cheery demeanor returned to the serious state of the night before.

Feeling shocked and a little unnerved at her close proximity, Danny nodded. He could smell the intoxicating aroma of her perfume, wild roses.

"How do you know?"

"While we were on the bus, he could see the dagger your father gave me." Confirming his point, Danny pulled the slender dagger from his pocket.

Sabrina stared at the blade, lost in thought.

"I told him to meet me after school. I figured we could explain things to him then."

"So be it. Then I will discuss this at length with father later." Sabrina released Danny and added, "I'll see you in gym class," she turned and disappeared into the bustle of the hall.

Looking around, trying to act inconspicuous, Danny made his way to his locker.

To Danny's surprise, the first two periods, music and math, passed without incident. After making his way into the gym locker room, he threw on his clothes for P.E. Unwilling to leave Tyramear's gift behind, he stuffed the dagger into the folds created by his right sock and his shoe. Satisfied, he made his way into the gym and sat cross-legged in his assigned position next to Chris.

"Hey, Danny," said Chris, turning to acknowledge his friend. However, his eyes went wide with shock as he looked down at Danny's right leg. Chris scooted closer. "Danny, why do you have a dagger in your sock?" he asked in a whisper, pointing at the object in question.

"You can see it, too?" Danny questioned as he covered the dagger with his right hand.

"Danny Firoth," said a familiar voice.

Danny looked up to find Mr. Ingram standing above him, his right eyebrow raised.

"You know the rules, Mr. Firoth," said Mr. Ingram. "No pens or pencils are allowed on your person during gym class. Please go and put it in your locker now."

"Yes, Mr. Ingram," Danny said, as he stood up and walked back toward the locker room.

"And where do you think you are going, Mr. Greene?" the gym teacher asked in an authoritative voice.

"I have to use the restroom."

"Make it quick, Mr. Greene, or I'll count both of you tardy."

Chris moved at a jogging pace to catch up.

Danny spotted Sabrina exiting the girls' locker room. She shot him a questioning look. Danny shrugged in response as he passed through the boys' locker room doorway, Chris darting behind him.

"Okay, Danny, what's going on?" Chris asked, once they were alone.

"You wouldn't believe me even if I told you," taking the dagger out of his shoe.

"Why do you have a dagger with you and why did Mr. Ingram think it was a pen?"

"We don't have time to discuss it now," said Danny. Once his locker was open, he removed the belt from his pants and began strapping it around his waist, just above his belly button.

"What're you doing?"

After securing the belt, Danny reached around and slipped the dagger under it at the small of his back, pinning it in place. Turning, he showed Chris what he had done.

"Just put it in your locker."

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"I just can't," said Danny again, closing his locker. "Listen, can you meet me after school?"

Chris hesitated, "I guess so. I have football practice so I have to stay after school anyway. Why?"

Chris was Danny's best friend, now more than ever and it was killing him knowing that he couldn't tell him the truth right away. "Meet me in front of the library and I'll explain everything."

Chris shrugged, his face distorted in confusion, "Okay, whatever."

Together, both boys left the locker room and made their way back to their assigned seating.

Sitting back down, Danny found Sabrina questioning him with that certain look on her face. Knowing that he couldn't give her an answer here and now, he simply smiled.

She didn't return the gesture.

After gym, Danny dashed to his locker and gathered the books he needed for science class. Midway through his packing, Sabrina appeared beside him.

"Hey, I thought we could walk to science class together."

Danny saw right through her act. "Sure," he said, playing along. Gathering up his book bag, he set off with Sabrina strolling beside him.

Turning at the base of the stairs, Sabrina pulled him to the side, "What happened in gym?"

"Chris Greene has the gift of sight as well."

Sabrina took a single step back and dropped her head as if in thought. "Three in such a short amount of time and all in the same area," she whispered to herself.

"What is it?"

Sabrina's head snapped up and looked around to make sure that she wouldn't be overheard. Taking a step back toward Danny, she said, "Those with the gift of sight are rare enough, but to find three at the same time, within such a small area... It has never happened."

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know, perhaps Father will know."

Before Danny could say anything else, the warning bell rang. "We should get to class."

Sabrina nodded, both hurried to science class. The tardy bell rang just as they passed through the threshold of the science lab.

"Just in time," said Mrs. Turner from behind her black desk.

Danny faked a smile, made his way to his assigned seat and dropped his book bag down on top of his desk.

"You barely made it," whispered Matt, as he pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah," said Danny, digging through his bag, pulling out his science book. Something shiny caught on the edge of the book, causing it to fall to the floor in front of Matt's desk. Danny's heart almost stopped as he watched the dagger bounce once before coming to a stop beside his friend's left shoe.

"Wow," said Matt as he reached down and retrieved the blade. "Where did you get this dagger?" holding it up parallel to his eyes for a better look.

"Do you have a question, Mr. Mickler?" Mrs. Turner asked before Danny could say anything.

Shocked, Matt's eyes went wide with surprise as he held the dagger up before him. "Um, no?" said Matt with a squint, as if he was unsure of the answer.

"Then why are you holding your pen up?"

Matt's right eyebrow lifted as he looked at the dagger in his hand, "What pen?"

"...The pen in your hand, Mr. Mickler. Are you feeling all right?"

The exchange caused a sudden swell of giggling from the other students.

"It's not a pen," said Alonso, his voice unable to carry past the rising laughter.

Reaching forward, Danny punched Alonso in the back in an attempt to quiet him.

Not taking kindly to the gesture, Alonso angled his fist behind him, pencil in hand, and connected with Danny's lower left leg.

A sharp pain spread up Danny's shin, causing him to glance at Sabrina.

"Do something," she mouthed.

She was right. He had to do something. "It's my pen," said Danny, turning, and snatching the dagger from Matt's hand. "He was just giving it back to me."

Confused, Matt simply nodded and adjusted his glasses once again.

"Alright, settle down, class," said Mrs. Turner, buying the excuse. "Today, we are going to learn about mitochondria," regaining control, turning back toward the black board.

As soon as he felt it was safe, Matt leaned over and whispered, "What's going on?"

"I'll explain everything after class," whispered Danny, stuffing the dagger back into his pack.

"We're meeting at the library after school," said Alonso, matching the hushed tones of both boys.

"Shut up," said Danny, slapping Alonso on the back of the head with the tips of his fingers.

The encouragement caused Alonso to reach behind him once again in an attempt at retaliation. Danny moved his leg just in time, causing Alonso to hit the steel bar of the desk instead. Alonso winced from the pain of the impact. Turning, he eyed Danny with a look of revenge.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Martinez?"

Danny smiled, Alonso had no choice but to turn back to the front of the class and say, "No, Mrs. Turner."

After class, Danny, Alonso, Sabrina, and Matt met up at the back of the science labs, where they were unlikely to be overheard.

"What does she have to do with this?" Alonso asked, pointing at Sabrina.

If looks could kill, Sabrina would have slain Alonso on the spot.

"More than you know," said Danny, intervening before Sabrina could retaliate. "But now isn't the time or the place to discuss it."

Alonso crossed his arms, shrugged, and said, "Whatever."

Turning toward Matt, Danny continued, "Meet us in front of the library after school, and I'll explain everything."

"Told you so," said Alonso with a smug smile on his face.

Both Danny and Sabrina glared at Alonso this time, if it had any effect, Alonso did not show it.

"Alright," said Matt, "but this better be good."

"Yeah," agreed Alonso.

Danny smiled, "Oh, you two have no idea."

Before anything else was said, the warning bell rang, forcing all four to fret about being tardy, rather than about the events of the day. With little time to spare, all four made a beeline for their individual lockers.

To Danny's relief, the rest of his classes passed without any more surprises. Sitting in English class, he watched the clock with a mesmerized focus and sighed with a sense of liberation as the big hand clunked over the designated number. The final bell rang through the school speakers, marking the end of the last period. He had already gathered his belongings in his book bag so he raced through the door almost before the bell stopped ringing. He walked quickly to his locker, secured his belongings and headed straight for the front entrance of the library. Waiting just outside the double glass doors, Danny scanned the crowd of students as they darted through the halls. A familiar face caught his eye; he turned to see Chris Greene.

"Alright, I have about ten minutes before practice starts," said Chris, stopping before Danny. "What's this all about?"

"We have to wait for Matt Mickler, Alonso Martinez and Sabrina Drake."

"Why?"

"I'll explain everything when they get here."

"Well, at least let me see that dagger of yours," Chris said, holding out his hand.

"Okay," said Danny, digging through the contents of his bag, pulling out the dragon-hilted dagger. Danny hesitated for a moment and handed it over.

Taking the blade, Chris turned it end over end in his hands, admiring the intricate artisanship. "It's beautiful." He pulled the brand free of the sheath with a subtle ring of steel. Greeted with the sudden halo of soft white light, Chris gasped in amazement. "Where'd you get this?"

"Wow, you didn't say that it glowed," Alonso said before Danny could respond.

"Does it use batteries?" Matt asked, standing beside Alonso.

Looking past Matt and Alonso, Danny spotted Sabrina rounding the corner of the hall.

"Let me see it," said Alonso, reaching out in an attempt to snatch the blade from Chris's hand.

"What's your problem, man, just wait," said Chris, pulling the dagger closer to his chest, smacking Alonso's hand away.

Danny suddenly realized that he'd created a mess. "Here, give it back to me," he said, knowing that taking the dagger out in the first place had been a mistake. He knew that if Sabrina saw this, she would be upset. Her father might even take back his gift.

"I wanna see it, too," said Matt in a whiny voice while pushing his glasses further up the slope of his nose.

"Just give it back, for now," argued Danny, but he was too late. Sabrina had entered the circle.

"What is going on here?" she asked, glaring at Danny.

"I, uh..." said Danny, trying to think of a valid excuse.

He failed.

"This is not the time or place for this," scolded Sabrina. "Give it..."

"Epic looking dagger," said a voice from beyond the group, interrupting Sabrina.

All five turned to regard the new arrival with confusion and curiosity.

Confronted with their attention, Doug Garrett smiled.

"You can see the dagger?" Danny asked.

Doug's face contorted with confusion, "Of course I can. Why wouldn't I be able to see it?"

Taking advantage of the focused attention, Danny seized the blade and scabbard from Chris's hands, sheathed it and placed it back in his bag. "Come on, we need a place to talk."

"Can I come, too?" Doug asked.

"Yes, Doug, you, too," said Danny, turning and walking into the library without waiting to see if he was being followed.

They found a circular table in the back, it was secluded behind two shelves stacked with books.

Danny positioned the dagger in the middle of the table. Once everyone was seated, he began. He told them what happened the night following his fight with Steven Rooney. He described the event, how Sabrina fought the Shadow, as best he could. Then he explained his second encounter with the Shadow, his discussion with Sabrina's father and his choice to become a Knight of the Light.

During the explanation, Sabrina filled in with things that Danny had trouble remembering.

As soon as Danny and Sabrina were finished, all four boys stared with wide-eyed amazement, switching their gazes from Sabrina to Danny and then back to Sabrina.

Alonso, as was common to his nature, was the first to speak. "You're a terrible liar," looking back at Danny.

"That's a good one, coming from you," said Danny, his voice hinted of anger.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means."

"I have never..."

"That's enough, Alonso," interrupted Chris.

Alonso crossed his arms, "Whatever."

Danny guessed that Alonso's sudden submission was because Chris knew him better than anyone else sitting at the table. Both were on the football team as well as the wrestling team. Danny had always thought that Alonso looked up to Chris because most of his lies tended to coincide with whatever endeavor Chris was currently chasing.

"Are you telling the truth, Danny?" Chris asked softly.

"Of course I am. Why would I lie about his? All of you have seen the proof with your own eyes," he said, pointing at the dagger in the center of the table. "Everyone else saw a pen while you saw a dagger. How could I make such a thing happen?"

"Okay, now what?" Chris asked.

Before Danny could answer, Matt raised his hand in question.

"What?" Danny asked. "You don't have to raise your hand," he added.

Matt put his hand down. "Can I look at it now?"

"Yes."

Matt took up the blade and unsheathed it, bathing the corner of the library in a soft white light. "Is it really magical?"

"You tell me."

Motivated by Danny's comment, Matt placed the sheath tip-first on the tabletop, pushed his glasses up, and held the glowing brand before his eyes for a closer inspection. Flicking the edge, causing the steel to sing from the vibration, he said, "It's definitely made of metal." Touching the tip with his finger, he added, "Sharp, too." Then, after attempting to twist the hilt, he said, "Well, there's no place to put batteries." Matt sheathed the dagger, placed it back in the middle of the table and said, "It seems real to me."

"...So, what now?" Chris asked once again.

"You must all decide," said Danny, looking from face to face, meeting the eyes of each friend in turn. "Whether you believe me or not, all of you have the

gift of sight. So you can either choose to live a normal life or be tested to become a Knight of the Light just as I have chosen."

"I believe you, Danny," said Chris with a steady tone. "I choose to be tested."

"Me, too," said Matt.

"Count me in," said Doug.

All eyes locked on Alonso, awaiting an answer.

"Give me a minute," the black-haired boy said. Silence passed as Alonso looked at the dagger, Danny, Sabrina, and then finally, Chris.

"Well?" Danny asked.

"Whatever... fine... yes."

"I shall let my father know," Sabrina said with finality.

7

The Trials of a Knight

Fall soon turned into winter, blanketing the ground with fluffy snow, which then melted away and gave way to spring. Six months passed without any sign of the Shadows. Even Steven Rooney kept his distance. Sabrina and Danny became fast friends. Anticipating the upcoming examination of the Light, Danny spent the majority of his time studying the only thing he knew, Knights.

On the first day of spring break, marked by a lazy morning without school, there was a soft knock at Danny's front door.

"Danny, get the door!"

Danny dropped his spoon in his half-eaten bowl of cereal and walked to the front door. Beyond the warped glass, he saw the dark silhouette of a tall man. Opening the door, the stranger greeted him with a brimming smile and golden eyes.

"Salutations, young Danny Firoth," said the man, dipping his head downward in greeting. His facial features were sharp, with high cheekbones and a pointed chin. He wore a silver business suit with matching dress shoes, golden cufflinks and a brass-colored tie. His long hair was a glossy black, it drooped down the slope of his shoulders. In his right hand, he held a black briefcase. However,

what truly caught Danny's attention was the gold-hilted longsword braced in his left hand, the base of the pommel was shaped in the form of a half-moon.

"You're a Knight of the Light," said Danny in absolute awe.

"Well, it seems you have passed the first test, Mr. Firoth," the man said in a musical voice.

"Well, who is it?" Danny's mother asked, rounding the corner, coming to a stop as she spotted the visitor.

"Ah, you must be, Ms. Patricia Firoth. I am afraid your son has yet to invite me in," he finished, widening his mesmerizing smile.

"That's because I taught him not to invite strange men into the house," said Patricia, coming to stand next to Danny. "You seem to know my name but I am afraid I don't know yours."

"Professor Syndil Sartak Tribolari, at your service," said the tall man, bowing elegantly.

"My, that is a mouthful, is it Italian? And aren't you a little young to be a professor?"

"I am named for a distant ancestor, Ms. Firoth," regaining his rigid stature, "I am afraid my lineage is quite complicated. Furthermore, to answer your second question, I was always taught that you should never judge a person by their appearance."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Syndil?"

"I am here to administer a test to your son, Ms. Firoth. Your son has taken an interest in a special summer school for talented youth."

Danny noticed his mother staring at him curiously. "And what is the name of this school you represent?" she asked, looking back toward the professor.

"The White Rock Academy of Illumination."

"I'm afraid I have never heard of it."

"Nor would I expect you to, Ms. Firoth. The school I represent is not interested in recognition. However, I can assure you that our alumni have gone on to accomplish some amazing feats."

"And how much will this summer school cost?"

"The White Rock Academy is a not-for-profit organization, its expenses are reimbursed by its predecessors, Ms. Firoth. Should your son pass the test I am going to administer to him, his enrollment will be paid in full by the school."

"Sabrina is going this summer too," said Danny.

"Yes, young Sabrina Drake has already been accepted for the coming semester."

"So that's what this is about," said Danny's mother, looking over at him.

It was true; Sabrina was a contributing factor. However, even without her presence, he would've chosen to become a Knight of the Light.

"I'm glad that she is going, Mom, but even if she wasn't, this is still something that I'd like to do," said Danny, making his thoughts verbal.

"You're sure about this?"

Danny nodded, "Yes."

"Then come in, Mr. Syndil."

The professor complied, stepping into the house.

"Would you like me to take your umbrella, Mr. Syndil?" Danny's mother asked, gesturing toward the long object in his left hand, which Danny clearly saw as a sword.

"No, Ms. Firoth, I am quite comfortable carrying it," he said with a smile. "You never know when a storm might pop up."

Danny's mother responded with a strange look as she closed the front door. "I'll be outside if you need me."

"Thank you, Ms. Firoth," said Syndil, before turning back to Danny. "Please, lead on, young Firoth."

Danny walked through the short hall, went past the kitchen and gestured toward an oval-shaped table surrounded by green-upholstered chairs.

Professor Syndil eased himself into the seat, placed his briefcase on the table, and rested his long sword on his lap.

Danny found a seat next to him and sat down.

Unlatching the case, Syndil opened it away from Danny so he couldn't see the contents.

"Well, you obviously have the gift of sight, young Firoth, or you would not have been able to see my Bonded."

"I know you," Danny said, his eyes grew wide and his voice jumped up several octaves.

"Really," said Syndil matter-of-factly.

Danny pulled a glossy piece of folded paper out of his pocket. There was an assortment of cards pictured on it. Pointing to the one in the middle of the page, he held it up for both to see.

"There, *Sir Syndil Sartak Tribolari*," reading the bold print off the depicted card. "Your card is one of the rarest in the series. I have been trying to get it for some time now." Danny dropped his head and stared at the piece of paper. "It says that you're the greatest swordsman ever."

"If I was a man, then perhaps so," said Syndil with a chuckle. "But, alas, I am an Elf, not a man." Pulling his long black hair aside, he revealed his ears, distinguished from the traditional by a flat stretch of skin where his earlobes should have been, and triangular-shaped arches.

Danny's jaw dropped in surprise. Dragons were one thing, but Elves. "You're an Elf?" Danny asked, stating the obvious.

"I have just announced that I am, young Firoth," said Syndil with a sympathetic smile. "However, I am not here to talk about me. It is you who requested testing for knighthood, yes?"

"Um... yes," regaining his wits, "I'd like to become a Knight of the Light."

"Good," fluttering his hair back around his shoulders so that it covered the most marked feature of his race. "Let's get started, I would like to ask you a few questions."

Danny nodded.

"Obviously, you are familiar with Knights, correct?"

"Yes."

"May I ask what faction you play, the Light, the Grey, or the Dark?"

"I play with the Light," said Danny with confidence.

"Why?"

Taken aback by the question, Danny took a moment to answer. He knew why he never chose to play with the opposing forces of Grey and Dark, but he'd never thought about why he'd chosen the Light. Danny smiled.

"Do you have an answer?"

"I play with the Light because battling with the Grey or the Dark simply doesn't feel right. I chose to play with the Light because, in a way, it is an extension of who I am."

Syndil returned his smile, "A careful, well-thought-out answer, Mr. Firoth. So, then, apart from Lady Drake's enrollment, why is it that you have chosen to become a Knight of the Light?"

Danny dropped his eyes and said, "I'd be lying if I didn't say it was for the adventure. Dragonics, Shadows, now Elves, who wouldn't choose to enter such a world."

"Be forewarned, Danny, this is not a fairy tale of fancy," said Syndil, his voice growing deep and stern, yet remaining respectful. "There is a war going on, with losses on both sides. There are dark forces at work, sinister things that will seek your destruction. This is no simple game of cards, Danny Firoth."

"I know that," said Danny, looking up, regaining eye contact. "I guess I want to become a Knight of the Light because the alternative, simply being normal while knowing that such things exist, is unbearable. If you know something terrible is happening, and you have the ability to help, it's your responsibility to do something, right?"

"I don't know, Danny, you tell me."

"I think it is. Yes."

Syndil nodded in approval. "I have just a couple more questions for you before we begin with what rests in my briefcase."

Danny gulped down his anxiety.

"Was your father a Knight of the Light, Danny?"

The question took Danny by surprise, he dropped his gaze. Danny never talked about his father with his mother; it was a sore subject, "Not that I know of."

"Tell me about him."

"My father was a soldier; he died a hero, I was very young at the time."

"I am sorry, Danny. I did not mean to open old wounds."

"It was a very long time ago," regaining his courage, facing Syndil.

"Did he leave you any kind of keepsake, something he cared very deeply about?"

"No."

"Are you sure?" Professor Syndil was insistent.

"No... nothing. Why do you ask?"

"No reason in particular, Mr. Firoth. I was only going to suggest that possessing something once close to the person one has lost is sometimes beneficial." Syndil allowed a silent moment to pass. "I have one more question for you." Leaning closer, he asked, "Do you possess any other ability other than the gift of sight, like the ability to see things before they happen?"

Danny froze as his mind drifted back to the memory of what happened during his fight with Steven Rooney. Danny explained the event in detail, hoping that was what Professor Syndil was looking for.

Syndil listened with active intensity, nodding, giving vocal cues to encourage Danny to continue. When Danny was done, Syndil sat back in the chair and stroked his chin in concentration. "A most intriguing ability, Mr. Firoth," he said after a moment. "Is this the only incident involving its use?"

"Yes, Professor Syndil, I've tried to use it again, but whatever happened that day hasn't happened since."

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No, you're the first person."

"I suggest that, until it happens again, you keep it that way."

"Why?"

"Other knights might become weary of such strange powers, Danny," explained Syndil, leaning closer, smiling. "Should you be accepted into the Light, I would consider it an honor to help you hone your ability, if you wish."

"Really," asked Danny with raised eyebrows.

"But of course," said Syndil with a sweeping smile. "However, before any such promises can be made, you must pass two tests."

"What kind of tests?"

"I am afraid I cannot disclose the details," said Syndil, reaching into the black briefcase. "The only thing I can tell you is the rules of the test, I suggest you listen to very carefully." He pulled out an obsidian hilt, minus the blade.

"What's that?"

"Your first test, Mr. Firoth," Syndil commented seriously, his smile gone.

Danny's heart pounded in his chest; Professor Syndil's stern look sent goose bumps across Danny's skin.

"What do I have to do?" Danny asked, gulping down more courage.

"You must hold it, Danny, but you cannot let go until I tell you. No matter what happens, you must hold it until I instruct you otherwise. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Good," presenting the blade-less black pommel. "Now, grasp it with your dominant hand first."

Reaching out with his right hand, Danny gripped the rough hilt at the top.

"Good, now with your left hand."

The instant his left hand touched the cool surface of the pommel, the room turned to utter darkness. "I can't see!" Danny said, panic evident in his voice.

"Do not let go of it," instructed Syndil.

Frightened, holding strong, Danny did as instructed. At first, he felt nothing but the weight of the hilt in his hand, warming to his touch. However, as the seconds ticked by, the surface of the handle began to burn, beyond the normal transfer of body heat. Within moments, the pommel grew hotter and hotter, scorching the palms of Danny's hands; his hair standing on end as the pain passed beyond his tolerance.

"It burns," said Danny, through clenched teeth.

"You must not let go, Danny," instructed Syndil.

Syndil's voice seemed distant as Danny fought through the sting of the searing heat. He could feel the flesh of his hands begin to blister and pop; he could smell the aroma of sizzling skin. Seconds turned into separate eternities until he could tolerate it no more. With a heavy grunt, he dropped the wicked hilt to the floor, it clanged as it collided. Taking a deep breath, his vision returned, Danny regarded his hands, expecting to see them burnt to the bone. Holding his palms before him, he noticed his skin was pink and unblemished. "What happened?"

"You have passed the first test, Danny Firoth," said Syndil with a gentle reassuring smile. Leaning down, he retrieved the jagged hilt and placed it back in his briefcase.

"But I let go before you told me," said Danny. "Shouldn't I have failed; I disobeyed?"

Syndil let out a light chuckle. "I have already said that you have passed, yet you argue for your own failure. You are an interesting young man, Mr. Firoth."

Danny's expression turned to that of confusion.

"Allow me to explain the test," said Syndil, noticing Danny's bewilderment. "The purpose of this test was not entirely about simply following directions. Of

course, a Knight of the Light must be able to take orders and fulfill them. However, one must also know when such a demand is beyond one's ability. You did well following my commands, not letting go—you held onto it longer than most, I might add. That shows me that you are loyal to those you trust. You pushed yourself far beyond the boundaries of your pain threshold for my sake alone. Additionally, you have only known me for a little less than an hour, you might be too trusting.

"When you made up your mind to let go, you proved to me that you can think for yourself and, on some level, you realized that I was simply asking too much of you. You showed courage in the face of your fear, perseverance when you believed that your hands were burning intensely and you still held on, and intelligence by realizing your limits and letting go. All of these attributes are vital to becoming a Knight of the Light."

Danny slumped back into his chair in relief. His hands began to tingle, an after-effect. He'd never thought about having any of the attributes Syndil had just described.

"You doubt yourself?" Syndil asked, as if reading Danny's thoughts. "Do not for a moment, for what I have said is true. I would not have said so if I did not believe it myself. The test does not lie, Danny."

Finding confidence in himself, Danny sat up and smiled.

"So, are you ready for the last one?" Syndil asked, returning the smile.

Danny gulped and said, "Yes."

"You see, my boy, you are brave." He reached into the briefcase as his smile widened. This time, he pulled out an alabaster hilt similar to that of the first.

Danny's heart stopped dead in his chest, his stomach became like a bottomless pit. His thoughts turned to dread as he looked on at the blade-less white handle.

"Are you ready?"

Danny took a deep breath and nodded. It was a lie.

"Alright, Danny, right hand first, just like before."

Hesitating nervously, Danny wrapped his right hand around the top of the hilt.

"Good," instructed Syndil in a soothing tone, "now hold it with your left hand."

Taking another deep breath, Danny placed his left hand around the pommel. Expecting his sight to go dim, he cringed. However, his vision never wavered. He felt a slight tingling sensation in the center of his chest. The feeling trickled up into his shoulders, down through his arms, and into his hands, causing the hilt to glow with a soft illumination. The light transferred to the top where the blade should have been. Gathering its force, the light formed into a slender

beam of radiance that extended into the air and melded into the solid shape of a glowing sword edge.

"Congratulations, Danny, you have passed the last and final test."

Danny felt light as a feather as he admired the ghostly edge of the sword. "What was this test about?"

"Having the gift of sight is one thing, Danny, but not all of those who possess it are able to wield a Bonded. By passing this test, you have proven that, once you qualify to receive such a gift, you will be compatible to possess a Bonded."

"...Really?"

"Really," said Syndil, extending his right hand. "...If I may?"

Nodding, Danny removed his left hand from the base of the hilt, causing the glowing brand to dwindle and disappear completely.

Syndil retrieved the handle and placed it back in his briefcase. Lingered for a moment, he produced a pamphlet, folded into three sections. Presenting it, he said, "Give this to your mother."

"What is it?"

"It is a brochure briefly describing the White Rock Academy of Illumination. Your mother will no doubt have questions. This leaflet will ease the suspicion of its true training purposes."

"Can't I just tell her the truth?"

"Of course you can, but that decision is ultimately up to you."

Lost in thought, Danny skimmed over the pamphlet, wondering whether to tell his mother the truth or to lie. He wondered if she would believe him if he told her the truth. After a moment of musing, he concluded that she wouldn't; he could hardly believe it was happening himself.

"Do you have any other questions before I depart, Mr. Firoth?" closing his briefcase and locking it.

"How will I get there?"

"Transportation to the school has always been arranged from Dodge Island in Miami, Florida. From there, you will travel by boat to White Rock Island. Sir Tyramear has already offered to ferry you to the Port of Miami, where you will board the *Radiance*, our most prized vessel." Syndil held up his right hand and pulled the cuff of his sleeve up his arm, revealing a golden wristwatch. "I am sorry, Danny, but I have a few other appointments I must attend to this day. I am afraid I must take my leave now."

Standing, Syndil hefted the black case as well as his Bonded in his left hand. Extending his right hand, he said, "It has been a pleasure, young Firoth. I look forward to instructing you at the Academy."

Feeling the need to stand, Danny took the Professor's arm at the wrist, just as Sabrina's father had done when they first met. Shaking once, he noted the feel

of the Elf's frail fingers; he also acknowledged the tremendous strength of his grip.

Syndil smiled widely at the contact, the expression was warm and welcoming—yet something about it put Danny on edge. Ignoring the feeling, he released his grasp and showed Syndil to the door.

"Good day, Danny Firoth," said Syndil, stepping beyond the threshold.

"Good day," Danny repeated, watching as Professor Syndil Sartak Tribolari turned and walked gracefully toward a sporty silver car.

8

Departing on the Wings of a Dragon

Soon after taking the test, Danny learned that Chris, Doug, Matt and Alonso had also passed it. However, due to his overwhelming excitement, the rest of the school year passed slower than Danny would have thought possible.

But the school year *did* end. Spring thaw transitioned into summer's sunny days, marking the last day of school.

Jumping off the bus, Danny sprinted across the road, crossed his yard and entered his house. He'd finished packing a week ago. The pamphlet had advised prospective students to pack only the essentials, suggesting that everything else would be provided once they arrived at the Academy of Light. Danny also packed a change of warm clothing at the suggestion of Sabrina's father. Apparently, the journey would be a cold one.

Grabbing his loaded backpack, Danny slipped the dagger he'd received as a gift from Tyramear into a side pocket, and sat near the door, rhythmically tapping his foot, waiting for his mother to return from work so that his adventure could begin.

Thirty-one minutes later, the familiar jingle of keys announced her arrival.

Danny ran to the door and yanked it open before his mother could even put the key in the lock.

Startled, Patricia Firoth placed her hand on her chest, "Danny, you almost scared me to death."

"Sorry," said Danny, he added, "Can we go now?" even before the sincerity of his apology could register.

"Can I at least come in and put my things in the house first?"

It was then that Danny noticed his mother had a handful, a brightly-colored red bag, an orange lunch box and a large sack of groceries. "Here, let me get the groceries," reaching for the sack, which his mother allowed him to take. After taking the hefty assortment of foodstuff, Danny stepped back, giving his mother ample room to enter the house.

She placed her red bag on the floor and walked into the kitchen, with Danny following closely behind. She placed her lunch box on the counter while Danny placed the bag of groceries next to it.

"Okay, can we go now?"

"My, you are in a hurry, aren't you?"

"Yes," he nodded dramatically for effect.

"Well, do you have everything packed?"

Danny held up his bag.

"Is that all you're taking?"

"You read the pamphlet, Mom. Everything we need will be provided for us once we get there, including clothes."

"Okay, okay... you're growing up so fast but I still see you as my little baby," rubbing the top of his head affectionately.

"Mom," Danny said, embarrassed by her loving gesture.

"Before we leave, I have something for you," returning to the hall and reaching into the bag she had brought home from work.

Danny followed her every movement with his eyes; he watched her as she rummaged through the bag and pulled out a present wrapped in glittering blue paper.

"Here, open it."

Danny took the package and began stripping the paper away, revealing a yellow-colored box with a phone pictured on it.

"You got me a phone?" his eyes widening in surprise.

"So you can call me while you're gone."

Danny's excitement faded as he eyed his mother, "Mom, the pamphlet said no phones allowed."

"I know," admitted his mother with a smile. "But you can at least call me when you get there."

Danny shrugged away her reasoning, "Okay, but can we go now?"

"Yes," she said with a laugh.

The ride to Sabrina's house was brief, Danny was sure that he would be the last one to arrive. He had only been to her house once, but with directions from Sabrina, they found it without too much trouble. Pulling into the gravel drive, Danny looked out in awe at the amount of land the two-story house was on, something he never noticed during his previous visit, it had been too dark. Sweeping cornfields stretched out on both sides of the driveway, towering pine trees created a corridor all the way to the house.

"Wow," said Danny's mother, also taken aback by the beauty.

After driving on the winding road for less than a minute, they pulled up to the house. The gravel driveway transitioned to cement, allowing for a smoother ride.

Tyramear stood on the porch, he walked toward the moving car in even steps as Danny's mother rolled the vehicle to a stop.

Getting out of the car, Danny got his first look at the backyard, more like a field than a yard. Like the driveway, the grounds rested between two vast cornfields. However, unlike the entrance, the backyard was devoid of trees, rocks or anything else, for that matter. It was simply a long strip of unkempt land.

"My goodness," said Danny's mother, getting out of the car, seeing the same scene as her son.

"Good evening," said Tyramear, stopping in front of the car.

Closing the car door, Danny's mother said, "Hello, I am Danny's mother, Patricia."

"I am Sabrina's father, Tyramear Drake. A pleasure to finally meet you," said Tyramear, extending his hand in greeting.

"You have a lovely home," said Patricia, shaking Tyramear's hand gently.

"Why, thank you." Then, turning toward Danny, "And, it is, of course, nice to see you again, Danny."

"Yes, sir, I mean, Mr. Drake. Is anyone else here yet?"

"I am afraid you are the second-to-last to show up, Danny. Mr. Mickler, Mr. Martinez and Mr. Garrett are waiting inside. Sabrina is in her room, packing. Once Mr. Greene arrives, we can begin preparing for the journey ahead."

Putting his bag on his shoulder, Danny turned toward his mother. "Well, Mom, I guess I'll see you in a few months."

"Not so fast, mister," bypassing her son. Digging through her pockets, she pulled out a square piece of paper and handed it to Tyramear.

Tyramear took it without question.

"At the top is my home address, our home phone number is next, then my cell phone number and my email address is at the bottom. I know the school already has this information, but I thought you should have it if you needed to

get in touch with me in an emergency," instructed Patricia, as Tyramear looked it over.

"Of course, Ms. Firoth," said Tyramear with a sincere smile.

Turning back toward Danny, "Well, give me a hug, then."

Danny stepped into her arms and found her familiar scent comforting. He was nervous about the coming months at the Academy but he was excited, as well. However, this would be his first time away from home; he would be lying to himself if he denied the fact that he was a bit frightened. He attempted to pull free from his mother's embrace, only to find her vice-like grip locked around him. He wasn't the only one who was worried.

"Mom," he said, his tone rising.

"Just give me one second more," she said, chuckling.

Again, Danny attempted to break free, but to no avail. "Mom," he said once more, this time with some conviction.

"Okay, okay." She released him and pulled away. "I love you." holding his head in both of her hands so that his eyes locked with hers.

"I love you, too, Mom."

With one last arm squeeze and kiss on the forehead, she freed him and made her way back to the car.

Danny took up a position next to Tyramear as his mother got back into the car, waving a final goodbye.

"So, Danny, are you ready to begin your training to become a Knight of the Light?" Tyramear asked, once Patricia Firoth's car became but a distant blur up the drive.

"I am," said Danny confidently.

"Good," said Tyramear with a smile. "Then you better get some rest, we leave at dusk."

"Shouldn't we leave sooner? It's a long drive."

Tyramear's smile widened and his eyes flashed with sudden delight. "We will not be driving."

"We won't?"

"You packed a set of warm clothes like I asked, correct?"

"Yes," his face showing confusion.

"Good," patting Danny lightly on the back. "Go inside and get some rest, you are going to need it for tonight."

Danny shrugged, picked up his bag and walked into the house. Once inside, he found Matt, Alonso and Doug resting on the floor on makeshift beds of different colored blankets.

All three boys glanced up, their eyes alert; resting was the farthest thing from their minds.

"What's up, Danny!" Matt yelled, pushing the thick glasses up on his nose.

"Be quiet," whispered Doug, who was lying next to him, followed by a swift kick from Alonso.

"Ouch," said Matt, rubbing the spot where Alonso had struck him. "What was that for?"

"We're supposed to be quiet, resting," informed Doug before Alonso could answer.

"Hey, guys," said Danny, laughing.

"Shouldn't you boys be resting?" Sabrina's mother said. "...Oh, hello Danny." Her features softened into a smile as she saw him.

"Hello, Mrs. Drake."

"You boys have a long trip ahead of you this evening. You really should get some rest." She swiveled back toward Danny. "You, too, Danny, there are more blankets and pillows in the closet for you," pointing to a white door behind her. "There should be enough for two more. There is one more coming, right?"

Danny nodded, "Yes, Mrs. Drake."

"Call me, Moon," she said with a smile.

"Yes, Moon," said Danny, his voice unsteady. "Where's Sabrina?" he asked before Moon could return to the kitchen.

"She's upstairs in her room doing the same thing that you should be."

"Yes, Mrs. Drake. . . I mean, Moon."

Moon disappeared beyond the swinging door of the kitchen.

Danny walked to the closet and grabbed a set of soft blue blankets and a pillow. Picking a spot between Doug and Matt, he plopped down on the floor, took his shoes off and sprawled out. After a few moments of silence, he whispered, "I don't know if I'm going to be able to fall asleep, I'm too excited."

"Are we driving there, or what?" Matt asked in the same hushed tone.

"We're definitely not driving."

"Then how are we going to get there by tomorrow if we aren't leaving until tonight?" Doug asked.

"Beats me," said Alonso.

Danny was about to say something when the front door squeaked open. Chris walked through the threshold and closed the door behind him. Danny waved in greeting.

"Hey, man," Chris said in an unrestrained tone.

Danny put his finger to his lips, signaling Chris's silence. "We're supposed to be resting."

"Yeah, Mr. Drake mentioned that," said Chris, matching Danny's hushed voice. "Something about a long trip tonight, right?"

"Yeah," said Matt, pushing his glasses up again.

"So . . . are we going to be driving?"

Chris's question caused a fit of nervous laughter to erupt from the four boys on the floor, unsure of the answer themselves.

"Did I say something funny?"

"No, man," said Danny, stifling his snickering, "we were just wondering the same thing."

"Oh," said Chris, unconvinced.

"There are more blankets and pillows in the closet," said Danny, pointing to the door. "If Tyramear suggests we get some rest, it's probably a good idea."

That was explanation enough for Chris as he walked to the closet, pulled out a pillow and a set of matching red blankets, and found a spot on the floor next to Danny and Doug.

A couple of hours later, after a lot of nervous chatter, boredom and suggestion gave way to sleep.



"Wake up," Danny heard someone say, drifting through his dream, stirring him to consciousness.

"Wake up," the musical voice called again; Danny's eyes opened a crack. Above him stood the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen, her long black hair draping delicately around her head like a waterfall.

"Beautiful," Danny said to himself, with only one eye halfway open.

"Wake up, Danny," Sabrina called for the third time. "It is time to leave."

Wide awake now, Danny's face flushed as he realized what he'd just said.

"Smooth," said Alonso, standing just to the left, laughing.

Looking around, Danny found Matt, Doug, and Chris with the same stupid smile on their faces, his romantic blunder having been witnessed by almost everyone, except Sabrina, he hoped.

"Come, Danny, we have many leagues to go and a limited time in which to travel across them," said Tyramear from somewhere behind Danny.

Even more embarrassed, Danny propped himself up on his elbows and turned to see Tyramear looking at him with a widening smile.

"Yes, sir," said Danny with a sigh. Standing up, he noticed that everyone was dressed in warm clothes, long pants and sweatshirts.

"You remembered to pack some warm clothes right, Danny?"

Danny nodded.

"Good, go and change. The bathroom is down the hall, first door on the right. Meet us in the backyard when you are through."

Eager to get away from accusing eyes, Danny grabbed his bag and darted toward the bathroom. He changed slowly, hoping that his friends would

quickly forget his recent slip-up. Once he was done, he exited the bathroom, made his way to the patio door and walked outside.

Near dusk, the sun lingered just over the horizon, shedding the last amber rays over the nap of the countryside. Danny noticed a large red barn with white trim a short distance from the house. Tyramear, along with his wife and the others, stood in front of the barn waiting for Danny.

Danny's eyes drifted from the imposing form of Tyramear to the elegant shape of Sabrina.

Sabrina turned and regarded Danny with a curious glare, accented with a simple smile.

"Good of you to join us, Danny," said Tyramear as Danny entered the circle of friends. "I was just about to explain our means of transportation."

Danny's head perked up, this was something he wanted to hear. He kept his silence, hoping that his lack of questions would urge Tyramear into a quicker explanation.

Tyramear turned, regarded the double doors of the barn before him and pushed them inward. A huge contraption complete with two rows of eight cushioned seats and a carriage compartment in the rear sat in the middle of the barn. Made from wood, polished to a sheen, the device contained etchings that seemed to resemble the scales of a dragon.

"What's that?" Alonso asked.

"This is my saddle carriage, it is a harness of the Dragonic, perfectly fitted to my back, so that I may ferry humanoids, like yourselves, through the heavens."

"So this long stretch of land behind the house is..." Danny allowed his words to trail off to prompt a response.

"... My runway," said Tyramear with a straight face. "You will be my passengers and I will be your transportation. The winds in the upper atmosphere can get quite cold. This is why I asked you all to dress warmly, as well as the reason for your needed rest. We will be traveling most of the night."

"But won't we be seen?" Matt asked.

"The cover of the night shall hide our passage," said Tyramear, an unwavering confidence in his tone.

"That's not what I meant," said Matt, pushing his glasses back into place snugly upon his nose. "Most airports use radar to detect aircraft, not to mention the military, right?"

Tyramear produced a slight smile. "In my Dragonic shape, my scales act like a natural form of stealth, deflecting and preventing any radio waves that might give away my position. Trust me, we will be invisible to any type of modern tracking systems."

Matt looked impressed as well as convinced. He kept any other questions to himself.

"Are there any other questions before we take off?"

"This is going to be epic," Chris said, looking at Danny.

Too excited to say anything, Danny nodded and smiled.

"Good." Tyramear picked up a heavy tapered rope attached to the front of the harness and pulled it taut. "Please, stand clear."

Danny followed Sabrina's lead as she stepped to the side, far out of the way. Matt, Chris, Doug and Alonso walked over to stand behind Danny.

Tyramear's muscles bulged beneath the fabric of his jacket as he grunted and pulled the saddle carriage free of the barn.

Amazed, Danny estimated that the harness must have weighed at least as much as a car; he couldn't fathom the amount of strength Tyramear must have used to accomplish such a feat.

After pulling the saddle a good twenty feet from the barn, Tyramear released the corded rope, causing the front of the harness to thud back to the ground.

Danny watched without blinking, still stunned by the act.

The sun dipped below the line of the world, sending a final ray of light to reflect off the cobalt-blue atmosphere.

"It is time," said Tyramear, marking the dimming of dusk, which would soon give way to the dark of the night. Striking out in a prideful stride, he walked thirty paces from the harness. His body began to glow with a comforting light, rivaling the last beacon of the setting sun.

Danny blinked once, when his vision returned, he swore he could see metallic scales forming across the exposed skin of Tyramear's hands, neck, and face. Danny watched, mesmerized, as the rest of Tyramear's body transformed. Seeing Sabrina's transformation was one thing, but seeing Tyramear, a full-blooded Dragonic, merge into his mighty form was something else altogether.

Tyramear loosed a furious cry as his neck stretched to impossible lengths. The wail continued but it changed as it distorted into a guttural roar, louder than any Human could possibly yell. His five fingers merged to become three wickedly long talons, and a thick-scaled tail sprouted from his back, whipping back and forth. The clothes he had been wearing transformed into the sparkle of scales as his body grew and grew, larger than Danny could fathom. His silver Bonded melded with the silvery scales of his back, affixed as if it had become a natural part of his body. Tyramear swelled in size, growing larger and larger until he rivaled the sizable red barn or the two-story house behind him. Vast, leathery wings sprouted from his shoulder blades, extending high into the air, then folding back behind him. Thick barbs, long and serrated, jutted out from his back, while a pair of spiraled horns extended from his elongated head.

When the transformation was complete, Tyramear's body towered high into the air, while his head, on the end of a lengthy neck corded with muscle, extended far above. His mighty wings fluttered outward, reaching beyond the

tops of the trees and across the surrounding cornfields before coming to rest at his side.

"He's huge!" Danny said with his mouth agape, now staring at a fully-formed full-blooded dragon. "And he's beautiful," he added, as the low light reflected off the shimmering silver scales that lined Tyramear's entire body.

"Epic," said Matt. He removed his glasses, cleaned the lenses with his shirt, and then placed them back upon his head, as if the act would reveal the sight as false.

Tyramear angled his long head down to peer at the smaller humanoids, letting out a soft grunt and a snort of hot air.

"What now?" Danny asked.

Tyramear hummed, causing the ground to vibrate. Opening his mouth, he revealed an array of sharp, silvery teeth as he leveled his head over the harness. Like a crane, he closed his massive jaws over the saddle and hoisted it into the air. The wood creaked from the clench as Tyramear maneuvered it over the back of his body, his neck twisting into angles only a dragon could accomplish. Lowering the saddle into place, he slipped it into the middle of his massive shoulder blades, on top of a silver spike protruding from the spine of his back. The harness slipped into place, the spine held it secure as it adhered to the curvature of his back. A series of metal clasps and latches dangled over the slope of his body, clanging as they met beneath him.

"Come," said Sabrina's mother, addressing her order to Sabrina alone.

Sabrina, without question or comment, as if this was an everyday occurrence, followed her mother beneath Tyramear's behemoth body.

Eyeing their approach with his silver, saucer eyes, Tyramear hunkered down, lowering his belly to the ground, giving his wife and daughter the reach required to fasten the harness to his body.

Reaching upward, Sabrina and her mother worked with practiced precision as they attached and tightened the straps above them.

Tyramear watched their work with curiosity as his massive head hovered just above them.

Finished, Sabrina jumped up and grabbed a hanging piece of leather. Pulling it down, she brought with it a rope ladder that unraveled before her. Preparing to climb up, she placed her hands on wooden toggles and stepped up with her right foot. Pausing for a moment, she turned, "You guys coming?" The question seemed more of a challenge than a query.

Danny was the first one forward. He watched Sabrina ascend with an experienced grace. Stepping before the ladder, he looked up, more than conscious of Tyramear's head hovering just above him. With an encouraging growl from the dragon, Danny ascended the wobbly ladder, one unsure step at a

time. Once at the top, he found Sabrina sitting contently in the first row of seats.

"You can stow your bag in the back storage compartment."

Slinging his pack from his back, Danny secured it in the rear compartment, it rivaled the trunk of the most spacious car. He returned to the front and claimed the spot beside Sabrina.

He watched as Chris came up next, followed by Matt, Doug and Alonso, all four placed their belongings in the back.

Chris and Alonso sat in the second row while Doug and Matt settled for the third.

"Well, are we ready?" Sabrina asked, swiveling in her seat, looking at each one of them.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Doug asked, his voice trembling.

"I can assure you that Father is unmatched in his aerial ability." As if her words not be convincing enough, Tyramear's horned head maneuvered into a supporting position just over her right shoulder and he growled his affirmation.

"I see," said Doug, not altogether convinced, but forced into agreement by Tyramear's intimidating stature and stare.

"For starters, I suggest we all strap ourselves in," said Sabrina.

Danny found two thick leather straps behind him and one beneath him with sterling silver clasps. Pulling the two behind him over his shoulders and the one beneath him between his legs, Danny buckled himself in. Leaning over him, Sabrina looked over his work and decided that it needed some improvement. She pulled the straps tighter. Danny grunted as the tightened slack forced him taut, pinning him to the back of the soft seat.

"We wouldn't want you to fall out, now would we?" Sabrina said with a slight smile.

"I suppose not," Danny wiggled against the confining belts.

Making her way to Chris, Alonso, Matt and Doug, Sabrina provided them with the same service, pulling the straps tight, causing a series of soft grunts.

"We are ready, Father," turning to face the large looming head of Tyramear.

The dragon dipped his head low and grunted, Danny could feel the grunt vibrating up from somewhere beneath him, it was accompanied by a soft puff of white smoke that steamed from both of Tyramear's nostrils.

"Have a safe trip," Moon called from below.

Danny watched with barely-stifled excitement as Sabrina leaned over him and waved goodbye. He smelled the sweet aroma of her perfume, the subtle scent of roses. Then it was over as quickly as it had begun. Sabrina returned to her seat and strapped herself in.

Danny felt the large body beneath him lurch upward, causing his heart to skip a beat. Tyramear's leathery wings expanded to impossible lengths as the

dragon turned and angled his long neck down the makeshift runway. Hunkering down, so that his long, silver talons dug deep into the soil, extending his neck straight as an arrow, Tyramear made ready for the launch.

"Hold on," said Sabrina, smiling.

Danny gripped the armrests on either side of him. Beneath him, Tyramear shifted backward for a split-second, before bounding forward. The acceleration was so quick that it forced Danny deep into the seat, causing him to touch the wooden paneling underneath the padding. He heard a few incomprehensible words from behind him, suggesting that his friends were experiencing the same sensations.

The harness jostled as Tyramear powered forward on all fours, picking up speed. Then he leapt into the sky. Danny suddenly felt like he was floating on a cushion of air. The wind whistled, whipping past his face as Tyramear traveled higher and higher into the night.

The sun had since given way to the rising moon, just a sliver short of full. The sky was clear, allowing the moon to bathe Tyramear's sparkling scales in soft light as he traveled toward it. However, just before Danny thought he might reach out and touch it, the dragon turned away from the heavenly light, dipped downward, picked up speed and turned south.

Tyramear leveled off and maintained heading as well as height with a few heavy flaps of his wings.

The motion dwindled to a soothing sway as Danny found his breath coming back into his chest.

"That was amazing!" yelled Chris.

"I think I'm going to throw up," added Alonso.

9

Arrival

Hours passed. Danny watched the world below with mesmerized attention from high atop Tyramear's back, the lights beneath stretching out like a reflection of the glittering stars above.

"Are you cold?" Sabrina asked, pulling his attention from the wondrous sight.

Caught off guard, Danny could do nothing but stare at her as words caught in his throat.

"You are shivering," Sabrina pointed out to him.

So taken in by his vantage point and Sabrina's proximity, Danny had failed to notice his body's reaction. He finally realized that he was definitely cold. The wind had grown colder over the past few hours. It was cutting through his clothing, chilling him to the bone.

"Just a little," his teeth chattered in between words.

"Here," reaching forward, opening a small compartment in front of her. Pulling out a heavy blue blanket, "Put this over you."

Draping the blanket over his shoulders, Danny noticed that Sabrina held on to the opposite half.

"We can share it," she said, smiling broadly at him.

Danny's neck hair stood on end at the prospect.

Sabrina told the boys behind her that similar caches of blankets were stowed in front of each of them. She turned and pulled the blanket over her body, causing it to pull taut as Danny held the other half.

Danny felt the buildup of body heat, he ceased to shiver.

"Better?"

"Much," said Danny, smiling, blushing.

Free from the biting sting of the cold, feeling self-conscious regarding Sabrina's proximity, Danny returned his gaze to the view below.

More hours passed, causing the lights beneath to disappear as the Earth began its nightly slumber. However, cities twinkled well into the night, a mass of illumination spreading out from a bright collection of lights, thinning as they neared the edge of civilization. Danny watched large cities coming into view, passing them with interest, trying to guess the amount of people that inhabited each one.

Time seemed to slow as the combination of Sabrina's warmth, the lull of the moonlight and the sway of Tyramear's beating wings took their toll. Danny's eyelids grew heavy, inviting him into the embrace of a restless slumber. On the verge of unconsciousness, Danny fought against the pull of sleep, causing the night to pass in a flutter of images.



"Danny," called the familiar sweet-sounding voice.

Coming sluggishly awake, Danny pried his eyes open.

"Danny, wake up, we are almost there."

Peering over the edge of the harness, Danny saw the outline of the landscape, illuminated by the soft glow of the moon. The coast of Florida stretched out below him; looking closer he saw a series of waves cresting and crashing along a beach. He felt Tyramear shift beneath him as he turned toward the utter dark of the ocean.

"Hold on!" Sabrina yelled.

Danny gripped the sides of the carriage as Tyramear dipped low in a steep descent. Forced back into the seat, Danny's heart skipped a beat once more. Angling toward the coast, Tyramear stretched his wings wide, slowing his dive, leveling out just above the surface of the roiling water. Lingering over the waves for a fleeting moment, Tyramear coiled his wings around himself and slipped into the sea. His sheer size, combined with his speed, caused a large splash.

The refreshing salty mist splattered Danny's face as Tyramear came to a sudden stop, floating lazily on the surface. Using his wings as paddles,

Tyramear propelled himself forward, following the lapping waves toward the coast, where a single globe of light, held by a lone shadowy figure, illuminated the white sand of the beach.

"Who's that?"

"A friend."

Tyramear swam forward and then rose high above the water as his legs met the shallow seabed. Padding out of the water and onto the beach, he hunkered down, swiveled his head toward his passengers, and sniffed.

"We are here," said Sabrina, throwing her piece of the blanket aside, unstrapping herself from the seat.

Content to be back on solid ground, Danny did the same. He allowed Sabrina to step over him and toss the rope ladder down Tyramear's scaly side.

"Come on," she said, as she climbed down.

Danny glanced back to his friends, they were also in the process of removing their harnesses. He looked down and noticed that Sabrina was almost at the bottom so he began his own descent. Two steps from the base, Danny jumped the rest of the way, landing lightly in the sand. He followed Sabrina's footsteps up the beach; she was hugging a man in thick black robes.

"It's good to see you again," Sabrina said in the midst of disengaging from the embrace.

The stranger wore a thick hood pulled over his head and carried a brilliant lantern in an outstretched arm, creating a pocket of shadows that hid his facial features. In his opposite hand, Danny noticed a glint of emerald, perhaps it was a Bonded.

"Are you a Knight of the Light?"

The hooded man's head swiveled in Danny's direction. Seconds passed as the man looked Danny over. "Of course I am," he pulled his hood back and revealed a slick, shaved head, complete with pointed goatee. "And who might you be?" he asked, his grey eyes reflecting the light of the lantern.

"I'm Danny Firoth."

"Tis good to meet you, Danny, you can call me Mick." He shoved his sword deep into the sand, presenting his right hand in greeting.

Danny took Mick's hand at the wrist and felt the intense strength of his squeeze. Danny's eyes lingered on the jade-hilted blade stuck in the sand.

"Her name is Jayden," said Mick, following Danny's eyes.

"...Her?"

"My Bonded," said Mick, retrieving the sword, holding it up to the light.

Looking closer, Danny noticed that the hilt, which looked like it was made from pure jade with thin inlays of silver, ended in the head of an open-mouthed dragon, the silver lines winding together to form a wicked array of teeth. The

scabbard, crafted in green-tinged gold-colored metal, contained an intricate engraving of the Light symbol.

"And who might these boys be?" Mick asked as Chris, Alonso, Doug and Matt joined the group.

All four boys introduced themselves one at a time, but before conversation could continue, Tyramear bellowed a rumbling grunt.

"Forgive me, my friend," said Mick with a smile. He turned toward the huge silver dragon. "Despite your immense size, it seems we somehow forgot about you."

Tyramear cocked his head to the side and snorted, obviously not amused.

"Come, let us relieve your father of his burden," said Mick, walking toward the massive form of Tyramear with Sabrina pacing behind him. "You boys can help, too, if you like."

Danny and his friends followed, making their way beneath Tyramear's massive front legs, stopping beneath his sternum, where the harness remained attached.

"Like this," said Sabrina, demonstrating the proper way of releasing the straps that held the saddle tightly to Tyramear's body.

Once the last strap was undone, Tyramear grunted in relief as he stood up to his full height, rotated his long neck, and locked his jaws around the sides of the harness. The wooden saddle creaked as he lifted it from his back and positioned it on the beach, causing it to sink into the sifting sand.

"We best get back," said Mick, herding everyone from beneath the dragon.

Free of the harness, Tyramear twisted his body from side to side, flinging the saltwater from his scales.

For a moment, it felt like rain. Danny held up his arms to protect himself from the sudden spray. Licking his lips, he could taste the essence of the ocean, sea salt.

Tyramear dipped his head low to regard the soggy group and released a series of guttural grunts, it almost sounded like laughter.

"Very funny, Father."

Ignoring his daughter's comment, Tyramear straightened his neck and sucked in a mass of air. Closing his eyes in concentration, his silver scales began to glow, rivaling the moonlight. His sharp talons disappeared beneath the surface of his fingers; his long neck compacted; his tail shortened, shrank, and then disappeared into his back. Once the transformation was complete, Tyramear opened his silver eyes and released his breath in a sigh of relief.

Danny knew that Tyramear's transformation would always amaze him, no matter how many times he saw it. The others also stared in awe at the man now standing before them dressed in a silver-striped suit.

"Epic," said Matt, adjusting his glasses.

Mick was the first to step forward. "It's good to see you again, my old friend."

"And you," said Tyramear, adjusting his Bonded on his back. He cocked his head first to one side, then the other, causing a series of pops and cracks to break the silence.

"Come, I have beds already made," said Mick. "You must be tired from the journey. And the Squires will need their rest for tomorrow's activities."

"...Squires?" Doug asked.

"You will find out soon enough, little ones," said Mick.

"I'm not little," said Alonso.

"Soon you will not think so boldly," said Mick with a smirk. "Come," he continued, not waiting for any other questions. Holding the lantern out before him, he began to move up the beach.

"What about the harness?" Danny questioned.

"Leave that to me," said Tyramear, bending down and gripping the thick, braided rope attached to the base of the harness. Pulling the cord taut, giving it one good pull, the heavy saddle lurched forward.

Seeing how easy it was for Tyramear to haul the harness across the beach, Danny stepped to the side, amazed once again at the strength the full-blooded Dragonic commanded.

Tyramear surged ahead with ease, pulling the harness up the sandy path, taking a position behind Mick. Even with the weight of the saddle dragging behind him, Tyramear matched Mick stride for stride.

Danny found that Chris, Alonso, Matt, and Doug's expressions mimicked his own, their mouths agape, their eyes focused on Tyramear.

"Are you boys coming?" Sabrina asked, stopping in the middle of the path.

Danny nodded and fell in beside her as she turned and continued up the sandy embankment. Chris and the others followed behind, muttering questions and comments about what they had just witnessed.

"Are you that strong?" Danny asked, directing his question at Sabrina.

"If you are asking me whether I am as strong as my father, the answer is no," said Sabrina with a soft smile. "He is a pureblood Dragonic and I am only a half-blood. But I am stronger than you," she finished, her smile widening.

Danny faked a smile and looked up into the night sky. "Oh," he said simply. Danny had been infatuated with Sabrina since the first time he'd seen her. She was smart, pretty, and apparently quite strong, mentally as well as physically. Currently, they were friends, nothing more, despite his desires, Danny couldn't summon the courage to change that fact. Consumed by his inner turmoil, Danny followed silently.

Mick led them up a sandy path between two towering sand dunes. On the other side, the trail widened as a pair of motion detection lights hummed to life,

illuminating a two-story house in the distance. The home rested on a series of thick, sturdy stilts, a precaution against the threat of hurricanes and tropical storms. Parked beneath the house and between the beams supporting it was a rugged four-by-four truck with large, knobby tires.

Two more lights activated as the party made their way down the sandy path.

"You can put that in the usual place," said Mick, pointing toward a rundown shack just large enough for the wooden harness.

Tyramear hauled the saddle over to the structure, turned, and said, "Now would be a good time to get your things."

Sabrina walked over to the harness and unlocked the panel in the rear. Digging through the contents, she pulled her bag out and slung it over her shoulder.

Danny found his own backpack and moved to the side as Chris, Matt, Alonso and Doug did the same. Finished, they all stepped clear and watched Tyramear push the heavy saddle into the shelter with ease.

Tyramear closed the double doors and walked past the five boys, ignoring their amazed gawks; the boys followed him. Tyramear found Mick, along with Sabrina, standing at the bottom of a series of steps that led up and into the house.

"Welcome to my humble home," said Mick after everyone had gathered around him. "Come, make yourselves comfortable," he encouraged, as he climbed the stairs.

Danny and the others followed behind, ascending the steep stairs. Mick opened the heavy wooden door and stepped through. He gave them the grand tour; the house contained four bedrooms, one for Mick, two dedicated for guests, one each for Sabrina and her father; the fourth contained an assortment of hastily-fashioned cots and blankets. Mick made it clear that Danny and his four friends would be sharing that room. There were two full bathrooms, a spacious kitchen and a family room, complete with an assortment of board games.

Once the tour was finished, Mick bid everyone goodnight and vanished into his room. Sabrina and Tyramear did the same.

Left alone in the dead of night, excitement still fresh in their minds, the five boys made their way to their room.

"I call the cot in the back," Alonso said as he entered the room and threw his bag on the makeshift bed.

Content to sleep anywhere, the other boys plopped down randomly. Sleep was the furthest thing from their minds.

"So, Danny, do you have a thing for Sabrina or what?" Alonso asked.

"What!"

"It's pretty obvious, man," said Chris, stretching out on his cot.

Embarrassed, Danny's face flushed as he sprawled out backward and placed his head in his hands. "What of it?" he said, getting defensive.

"Take it easy. I was just wondering which side of her you liked more, the Human side or the Dragonic," joked Alonso. "You ever think about which is actually her true form? I can't imagine kissing a dragon."

"Eeew, epic dragon breath," said Matt with a giggle.

Matt's mirth gave way to rambunctious laughter as Doug, Alonso, and Chris joined in the merriment. After a few seconds, even Danny began to laugh.

"I think both of her forms are beautiful," Danny blurted, which caused the amusement to grow tenfold.

"Have you told her how you feel, man?" Chris asked, once the laughter died down.

"No."

"...Why not?" Doug asked.

"I'm too embarrassed, too scared," admitted Danny. "What if she laughs at me to my face?"

"What if she feels the same way about you?" Chris said. "Sometimes the gains outweigh the risks, man," he added, before Danny could respond.

"Yeah," was all Danny could say. "Plus, her father kind of scares me. He is a full-blooded Dragonic. You saw him today."

"Yeah, even though it happened right before my eyes, I still can't believe what I saw," said Doug, shoving his bag beneath his cot. "Is this really happening to us?"

"We just flew a thousand miles through the air on the back of a huge silver dragon," said Matt, taking his glasses off, polishing the lenses with the sleeve of his shirt.

"This is the best vacation ever," said Alonso.

"This is no vacation, guys," said Chris, his voice turning stern. "We made this journey to become Knights of the Light. We've seen some amazing things, but don't lose focus, if this is real, then so is the threat of the Shadows."

"Chris is right," said Danny. "I've seen two Shadows already, and they're as real as you and me. We must be prepared. Believe me, I'm as excited about all of this as you guys are, but we can't let that distract us from the real purpose here. We must become knights, and I am beginning to think that it won't be as easy as I originally thought."

"What do you mean?" Matt asked.

"Do you think they'll just give us each a Bonded? The Shadows are malicious killers, skilled in combat. Even with a magical dagger, I'm pretty sure I'd be useless against one." To further his point, Danny pulled the dragon-hilted dagger from his bag and unsheathed it, bathing the room in a soft white

light. "I watched Sabrina defeat a Shadow on her own, but she had to change into her dragon form to do it."

"You're right," said Sabrina.

All five boys looked up in utter surprise.

"How long have you been standing there?" Danny asked.

"...Long enough," said Sabrina with a sly smile.

Danny's face turned a deep shade of red, he looked down.

However, Sabrina's smile disappeared as she continued. "It takes hard work and dedication to become a Knight of the Light. I assure you, the threat of the Shadows is real, and all of you will need to be as focused as you can be to take on the trials ahead of you. You will all need your strength for what is coming, so I bid you goodnight." She closed the door and left, her light footsteps echoed down the hall as she made her way back to her own room.

"It seems your secret is out now, genius," whispered Alonso, snickering.

"Shut up!" Danny said in the same hushed voice. He threw his pillow at the black-haired boy, catching him full in the face. Danny felt humiliated but at the same time he felt somewhat relieved. Sabrina hadn't laughed at him or denied her own feelings for him. Perhaps, there was a chance.

Alonso turned and tossed the pillow back as hard as he could. Distracted by his thoughts, the pillow struck Danny dead in the face. Picking up the pillow, Danny hauled back and was about to return the favor.

"Cut it out, you two," said Chris. "Sabrina was right. We should get some rest."

Alonso glared at Danny one last time before flopping down onto his cot and facing toward the wall.

An excited, uncomfortable silence settled over them. Questioning what was to come to themselves, but exhausted from the events of the day, all five boys changed into their sleepwear and fell fast asleep.

10

The Forces of the Gray

Danny woke up to the familiar aroma of frying bacon. Prying his eyes halfway open, he noticed that he was the third one up; Doug and Matt still slumbered in their cots; Chris and Alonso lingered wide-eyed and lazy in their make shift beds. Stretching, letting out a soft yawn, Danny changed out of the clothes he'd slept in and slipped on his sneakers. "Morning," he said as he exited the room.

Entering the kitchen, he found Mick fast at work, preparing a hearty breakfast of bacon, scrambled eggs, French toast and muffins. Danny's eyes gravitated to the jade-hilted blade strapped across Mick's back.

"Good morning," said Mick, without turning.

Danny was sure that he had not made a sound but even while concentrating on his cooking, Mick had sensed his presence. "Good morning," said Danny with a yawn.

"You are just in time to help out," said Mick in the midst of turning and revealing a wide smile. "Come and stir the eggs, lad."

With nothing else to do, feeling obligated, Danny stepped forward. The eggs rested in a large pot, steaming from the open flame beneath them. Untrained in

the art of cooking, but content to help, Danny gripped the handle of a long wooden spoon and began to stir.

"So, how do you know Tyramear?" Danny felt somewhat self-conscious, the kitchen was too quiet for him.

"He was a professor during my time at the Academy of Illumination. He taught techniques, now taught by Sir Syndil, you will soon become well-acquainted with him."

"I've already met him."

"...Really?"

"Yes, he administered the trials of my acceptance test for the Academy."

"Peculiar," said Mick, he stopped what he was doing, his eyes peered beyond the window, focusing on something far away. He stroked his pointed goatee.

"What did I say... is there something wrong?"

"No, lad, it's just that Sir Syndil Sartak Tribolari doesn't usually leave the Academy, not unless he takes a particular interest in something."

"Is that so?" Danny inquired, becoming quite interested in this particular conversation and where it was going.

"Well, you see, Sir Syndil has always been quite interested in the Eye, as well as the Shadows. He has studied both for some time. In addition to being one of the greatest swordmasters of all time, he is one of the leading experts on the Shadows."

"Do you mean the Eye of Darkness?"

"The very one," said Mick, a little surprised. "You're rather knowledgeable for a novice squire."

"Tyramear told me."

"I see," said Mick, once again looking distant. "But, still, I wonder what caught the swordmaster's attention so much that he would venture beyond the borders of White Rock."

Danny began to wonder about the real reason for Syndil's visit as well. He recalled that Sabrina had seemed quite surprised when she'd learned that Alonso had the gift of sight, was amazed outright when Chris had proved to have the ability as well, and completely floored when Matt and Doug had presented with the same capability. Could that have been the reason for his visit?

Still, Syndil had seemed quite interested in the incident with Steven Rooney and his talent for predicting Steven's movements, a feat that he hadn't been able to replicate. Danny decided that perhaps he should share this information with Mick. However, Syndil had said that he shouldn't talk about it with anyone else.

Before Danny could make up his mind, Mick broke his concentration and said, "You're going to want to stir that again."

Danny looked down. The eggs were beginning to darken, clumping together at the bottom.

"They will burn if you do not stir them, Danny," Mick smiled.

Danny returned the smile and whipped the wooden spoon in the pot with a quickened pace, causing the clump of eggs to break apart as they melded into the fluffy form with which he was familiar.

"Something smells good," said Alonso as he entered the kitchen, followed by Chris, Doug, and Matt.

"Have a seat, boys," said Mick, as he motioned toward a large oval table in the corner, complete with eight wooden chairs. "Thank you, Danny, you did a most excellent job with the eggs. Go and join your friends."

Danny found a seat next to Chris, still caught up in the mystery of his thoughts.

Moments later, Tyramear and Sabrina appeared, just in time to help Mick place breakfast upon the table. Once Mick took his place at the head of the table, they began eating.

Danny allowed the fork to fall from his fingers and clang on the plate in front of him. Sitting back in his chair, he rubbed his distended stomach.

"Well, I suppose we should be on our way, then," said Mick, scooting his chair away from the table, standing up. "We have a decent drive ahead of us. Wouldn't want any of you to miss the cast off, now would we? Get your things and meet me downstairs by the truck in ten minutes." Mick began clearing the table.

Chris, who'd already eaten almost twice as much as anyone else at the table, leaned forward and snatched the last muffin before Mick could remove the plate.

"What?" he asked everyone as he crammed the last chocolate muffin into his mouth. "I was hungry," he added with his mouth full, his words were muffled, making them almost incomprehensible.

Excusing himself with a soft chuckle, Danny walked back to the room and gathered his belongings. Fumbling with his backpack, a slim metallic object fell from the side pocket, the phone his mother had given him.

"I almost forgot," he said to himself, reaching down and retrieving the item.

Searching for privacy, he left the room, exited the house, and descended the steps to the sandy ground below. Walking a short distance from the house, he noticed the difference in temperature as a drop of sweat began to bead on his brow. Moments later, a slight breeze swept over the distant sand dunes, carrying with it cool air and the scent of the salty sea.

After dialing his number, he pressed the phone to his ear and waited for his mother to answer it. After three rings, the phone clicked.

"Danny?"

"I'm okay, Mom. We made it okay."

"You're there already?"

"Yeah, we traveled through the night," not really the truth, but not altogether a lie.

"That must have been a long drive."

"Not really," with a smile his mother couldn't see.

"So, when are you leaving for the school?"

"Come on, Danny," Alonso yelled from behind him.

Danny turned to find all four boys and Mick waiting by the truck. "Well, Mom, I guess we're leaving right now," ignoring Alonso's insistent waves.

"Okay, Danny, have fun," she finished with, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom—bye." He clicked the phone off as he made his way over to the truck.

"You're going to have to leave that with me, Danny," said Mick, extending his hand, palm up.

"...My phone?"

"Such devices aren't allowed on White Rock."

Although Danny knew this to be true from the pamphlet Syndil had given him, he felt the need to ask, "...Why not?"

"You are familiar with the game of Knights, yes?"

"...Of course."

"Then you are also familiar with the forces of the Grey?"

"I play with the Light, but I've faced some Grey decks before, mainly Matt's."

Hearing his name, Matt turned and forced his glasses further up the bridge of his nose.

Danny suddenly noticed that all eyes were on him, their interest piqued by the current conversation.

Without missing a beat, Mick continued, "Well, as you know, the Grey are characterized by rogue knights and technology, correct?"

Danny nodded.

"There is some fact to that, but mainly the Grey represents certain governments that are interested in our organization, the Order of the Light, and the power of the Shadows as well. You see, much like the Dark, some seek to use the Shadows as a weapon against their enemies. Others seem to understand the evil the Shadows represent and have, at times, worked alongside of us. Lastly, there are those that desire both. The overall truth is that most of these governments operate in a grey area where their intentions are often difficult to determine, hence the title, Grey."

"...And the phone?" Danny asked, presenting it in the palm of his hand.

"Can be traced and monitored, Danny. The Grey live in what you see around you, an age of technology, while we, the Order of the Light, still operate based on centuries of tradition, devoid of modern-day conveniences," said Mick, taking the phone from Danny, placing it in his pocket. "Had you taken

this phone to the Academy of Light, you would've run the risk of giving the Grey information that we prefer to keep secret. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"No, not yet, you don't, Danny," said Tyramear, descending the steps of the house with Sabrina behind him. "None of you quite understand yet—not fully, anyway," he finished, stopping in front of Danny. After looking at each boy individually, he continued, "All of you are about to enter into a world of war. Seeing dragons, Elves, and magical swords is only the beginning, boys. True dangers await you, dangers that must be seen to be believed. One of you has already borne witness to the enemy." Tyramear looked down at Danny. "He understands more than the rest of you do. At the end of your first year, you will have a choice to make, you will be asked to continue your training or to quit. Many choose to continue, but there are those without the stomach to face the darkness you will soon know."

Danny looked to Sabrina, as she stood at her father's side, a small comfort compared to Tyramear's intimidating voice.

After waiting for a moment, in order to allow his words to sink in, Tyramear continued, "So, I will ask you all one last time, are you prepared for what is to come? Are you willing to give everything you have to work against the darkness that stands at your door? Do you want to become Knights of the Light?"

Danny turned to regard his friends. They all locked eyes one at a time and measured the underlying confidence of the others. Then, in unison, they turned and gave up a resounding, **"Yes!"**



Casting Off on the Radiance

The trip to the dock was a quiet one, everyone seemed lost in their own thoughts, Danny was no different.

Until this point, Danny had been sure he knew what was to come; now his confidence wavered. The Shadows were immensely strong, he was a mere teenager. What could he really do in a one-on-one battle? Right now, he knew he wouldn't stand a chance against one. Danny turned to Sabrina, who sat in the middle between Danny and Chris.

Sabrina was focused forward, looking ahead with a confident air. For an instant, Danny thought she might return his gaze, yet she never did. He wondered how she could remain so calm and confident. Then again, she had showed the same poise in her struggle with the Shadow.

Sabrina Drake was a mystery to Danny, one that he desperately wanted to figure out.

"We are almost there," said Mick.

Danny peered beyond the window of the truck. "Where is it?"

"There," said Mick, pointing down the distant two-lane road and across a wide, arching bridge.

Danny followed the line of Mick's finger to a large, oval-shaped island, a collection of cruise liners were docked on the left-hand side. The sheer size of the ships rivaled some of the towering buildings of downtown Miami. Halfway atop the bridge that stretched over the ocean beneath him, Danny was presented with a sweeping view of Dodge Island.

"Which one is our ship?" he asked.

"The *Radiance*," said Mick, "the third one on the left."

Danny glanced at the ship Mick was talking about. He noted that the third ship in line was a massive twelve-deck cruise liner.

"We're going on a cruise ship?" Alonso asked, with wide-eyed excitement.

"No," said Mick with a slight chuckle. Tyramear joined him in the merriment. "Look just beyond the bow of the second ship and you will see her."

Danny leaned forward and squinted as he searched. He saw what looked like the masts of a galleon, the kind of ship he'd read about in history class that had been used in the late sixteenth century. However, before Danny was certain of his observation, the bridge began its descent, cutting off his view of the mysterious ship.

"Did you see her?" Mick asked as he slowed for traffic.

"I think so," said Danny, still a little confused.

"Well, you will soon get a much better view," said Mick, turning the car to the left. "Take another look." He pointed straight ahead.

Danny gasped. Before him floated a four-masted galleon, resembling something he might have seen in an old pirate movie. The hull of the ship, painted bright white, had the name *Radiance* on the bow, printed in bold black lettering. The bow, or front of the ship, had an elongated beak with a level perch. The aft, or back, was shaped in a squared tuck stern.

"That's the ship that's going to take us across the ocean, into the Bermuda Triangle, and to White Rock Island?" Alonso questioned in disbelief, putting words to everyone's thoughts.

"Indeed it is," said Mick matter-of-factly.

"Great," said Alonso, throwing his hands up for affect, "we're all gonna die!"

"She may be old, but she is just as sound as any other vessel you see around you, perhaps more so," put in Tyramear. "You will soon find out that the *Radiance* is truly one of a kind."

"That's what I'm afraid of," added Alonso.

Mick pulled into a parking place and switched the ignition off. He swiveled in his seat. "Go or stay—it's still your decision," he said, directing his comment toward everyone.

"I'm going. I didn't come all this way just to stay in the car," said Chris, opening the door, stepping outside.

"Me, too," said Danny, getting out on the opposite side of the vehicle. Sabrina followed behind, it went without saying that she'd be going.

"Don't forget me," said Matt, retrieving his bag, getting out on the same side as Danny had.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," said Doug, exiting the truck with his bag in hand.

"Whatever," added Alonso, he followed his friends.

Standing next to Mick, Danny peered out toward the *Radiance* and noticed a wide gangplank secured to the side, a group was beginning to gather there for boarding. Looking closer, he noticed that all of them were either his age or older, most carried the hilt of a Bonded.

"Are those Knights of the Light?"

Mick followed Danny's gaze, "No, lad. Squires, like yourself, returning to the Academy to continue their training. Those with a Bonded are either third-year squires or above." Seeing Danny's confused expression, he added, "You won't be coupled with a Bonded until you return for your second year."

"So I won't receive a Bonded right away?"

"No, lad, the training is tough enough without trying to fiddle with a blade in your brain."

Again, Danny looked at him with confusion.

"Sorry, lad, I'll not spoil that surprise," Mick said with a smile. "Besides, as Tyramear already explained, there are those that choose not to continue their training. What good would it do to waste a Bonded on someone who would never use it?"

"I suppose I see your point."

"You mean, I came all this way and I'm not even gonna get a sword?" Alonso asked, apparently listening in on the conversation.

Mick produced a wide smile. "Don't worry, boy, by the time you're done, you won't want to see another sword ever again."

"This is as far as I go," said Tyramear from behind them.

Danny turned to see Sabrina standing in front of her father, Tyramear cradling her head in his hands.

"I am proud of you, my daughter," Tyramear said to Sabrina.

Danny felt a slight pressure on his shoulder and turned to find Mick's left hand resting on him, his right hand extended for a handshake. Danny obliged him and once again felt the power in the man's grip.

"Any friend of Tyramear is a friend of mine," said Mick. "I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, Mick."

Mick released his grip with a smile and then moved on to Chris, shaking his arm at the wrist, wishing him luck.

Danny watched as Mick went through the ritual three more times.

"Danny."

Danny turned at the sound of his name, finding Tyramear standing before him with Sabrina by his side.

"You are brave, Danny, to have stood before a Shadow in an attempt to defend my daughter. Forgive me, but I never thanked you for your actions that night."

"I didn't really do anything."

"But, you did," replied Tyramear, placing a sturdy hand on Danny's shoulder. "You stood up to evil incarnate. You put yourself in harm's way without any thought to your own safety, for Sabrina's sake. Unknown were the odds against you, but still you did what you considered was right. Such is a display of incredible courage. I look forward to learning of your progress at the Academy of Illumination. I shall watch you closely, Danny Firoth."

Danny didn't know what to say except, "Thank you," the short affirmation stuttered from his stunned lips. Swiveling toward Sabrina, he noticed an approving smile stretch across her mouth.

"You are welcome," said Tyramear, extending his hand. "And thank you again," he added as Danny met him in a shake, gripping his forearm. "Now, I believe you all have a ship to catch."

With that said, Sabrina moved off toward the towering masts of the *Radiance*. Danny followed behind, catching up quickly. Doug, Matt, Chris, and Alonso joined them; together they began the short trip toward the boat.

"Sabrina," yelled someone, causing the group to look to the right, a boy of similar age with long blond hair waved with vigorous energy.

Sabrina waved back as the blond-haired boy closed the distance at a jog, carrying a brown backpack.

"Hey, Rogen," she said, once the boy stopped in front of her.

Upon closer inspection, Danny noticed that the boy was well-muscled with skin tanned to a golden brown. His deep blue eyes regarded Sabrina excitedly as he dropped his bag and hugged her. Danny became jealous instantly.

"You know this guy?"

Holding Sabrina at length, Rogen turned toward Danny, "Who are the newbs?"

"Newbs!" repeated Danny in a raised tone, wondering if he'd just been insulted.

"Friends," said Sabrina with a smile, pulling away from Rogen's embrace. "This is Danny Firoth, and behind him, Doug Garrett, Matt Mickler, Alonso Martinez and Chris Greene."

"What are you doing with a bunch of first-years?"

"They are my friends," said Sabrina again, her voice carrying a hint of annoyance at having to repeat herself.

"Okay," conceded Rogen, scratching his head. "Well, are you coming?" He motioned toward the *Radiance*.

"I am going to make sure they get on properly," said Sabrina.

Rogen shrugged, "Okay. I guess I'll see you when you board." With that, he turned and walked off toward the awaiting ship.

"Who *was* that?"

"We were both first-year squires together. I met Rogen at the Academy last year. He is not the brightest of the lot but he's got decent technique with a sword and he is a good friend."

"Last year?" repeated Danny, something he seemed to be doing a lot lately.

"Yes," said Sabrina matter-of-factly, "this will be my second year at the Academy."

Danny was dumbfounded. He stared at her in disbelief. He felt betrayed as well as stupid. "Why didn't you tell me that you had already attended the Academy?"

"You never asked me," she said simply.

Dumbstruck again, Danny kept his words to himself, they wouldn't have been pleasant spoken aloud.

"So, you've already been through your first year at the Academy of Illumination?" Matt repeated.

"Yes," said Sabrina in a sharp tone, getting annoyed, having to repeat herself.

"What's it like?" pressed Matt.

"Challenging," said Sabrina. Matt was clearly waiting to hear more but she refused to go into detail.

"...How?" Danny asked, still stuck on the previous subject.

"...How what?" Sabrina inquired, confused by the sudden shift in topic.

"How'd you get into the school? You would've been too young. You're the same age as us," Danny added.

"No, I am not the same age as you, I am a half-blood Dragonic, and as such, I age much faster than Humans. If I were a pureblood Dragonic, I would practically be an adult by now."

"Then how old are you?"

"I am half a year away from my tenth birthday."

"You're only nine and a half years old?" Matt asked, adjusting the thick lenses of his glasses, in light of the shocking realization.

Danny's jaw dropped, he shook his head. This whole time, he'd assumed that Sabrina was about the same age as himself . . . but to be so much younger? Danny nearly fainted. However, he felt a steadying hand on his right shoulder. He turned to find Chris standing next to him.

Chris's expression was empathetic, acknowledging Danny's inner struggle. However, it vanished as Chris turned to regard the *Radiance*. "Perhaps we should get on board."

Danny followed Chris's gaze and noticed that the line to board had dwindled to but a few, as if to emphasize his friend's words further, a large golden bell rang out atop the highest mast, signaling the ship's final preparations for departure.

"Chris is right, let's get moving," said Sabrina with a momentary smile. She turned and headed toward the ship. Unfazed by Sabrina's age difference, Doug and Alonso followed behind her. Before Danny could do the same, Chris's hand lingered and squeezed, holding him in place.

"You should tell her how you feel about her, man."

"Easier said than done," said Danny, turning to regard his closest friend.

"The hard things always are and it's usually worth the struggle." He gave Danny's shoulder one final squeeze before moving toward the others.

Danny lingered for a moment before he followed in his friend's footsteps. He felt unsure of the events unfolding around him. Last in the line, he stopped before a man with a scraggly-looking beard, the man held a worn clipboard with a yellowed parchment. His friends had already passed this particular checkpoint and waited for him on the boarding plank. The man wore a white uniform with the symbol of Light stitched on the upper left chest, marking him as part of the crew.

"Name," said the man in a rough voice.

"Danny Firoth."

With a swipe of his hand, he made a check mark on the bottom part of the paper. "Okay, you're the last to board," he said, looking up, smiling, showing a series of missing teeth.

Danny couldn't help but stare.

"Well, get on with it, Squire, get on board," shoing Danny up the gangplank.

Danny raced up the ramp to join his friends as they boarded the *Radiance*.

"All crew and passengers accounted for, Captain!" the man yelled from the dock.

"All hands, prepare to cast off!" the captain boomed in response.

Danny turned toward the sound of the echoing voice.

Standing at the helm, behind a large wooden steering wheel, was a man dressed like the other crew, but with some unsubtle differences. He wore a tall sweeping hat accented with silver trim, and a series of silver tassels draped on his shoulders, signifying the rank of captain. But the most eye-catching piece of equipment he possessed was an ivory-hilted blade strapped to his side, the pommel was carved to resemble the head of a great white shark.

"That is Sir Rodrick Hemlin, captain of the *Radiance*," said Sabrina as she followed Danny's gaze.

"He's a Knight of the Light?" Danny asked.

"Yes."

"Cast off!" Captain Rodrick yelled, stepping to the side of the boat to investigate the progress of his crew.

Many more commands followed, most of which Danny didn't understand. The boat began to rock back and forth with a soft sway and the crew fell into a standard practiced rhythm, pulling a rope taut here and wrapping one around there.

"We should get out of their way," said Sabrina. She began to move toward the bow, the foremost part of the ship.

Danny followed, moving between the busy crew. Once at the bow, he noticed that most of the first and second-year squires had gathered in this area.

"Most of the senior squires are in the passenger quarters below decks," explained Sabrina as if reading Danny's thoughts. "I suppose after once or twice, casting off is not as exciting to them, but it's my favorite part."

Before Danny could ask why, he felt the *Radiance* lurch beneath him.

"Hoist sail!" Captain Rodrick yelled, his voice was clear and crisp despite his position aft, the back of the ship. The sails unfurled, draping downward, flapping in a strong breeze. The crew went to work, pulling the sails taut, catching the power of the wind. The fabric of the sails ballooned outward, causing the ship to creak from the pressure of the jerk as the *Radiance* took on a quick forward motion.

The deck groaned beneath Danny's feet as the ship bounded forward, forcing him to place a steadying foot behind him. Combined with a mist of seawater, the air smelled salty and pure as it whipped past his face. It was an exhilarating feeling, almost as if he was flying. However, due to his recent experience with flight atop a dragon, Danny had to admit that this experience fell short, but it was amazing, nonetheless.

"I can see why you like it," conceded Danny, turning toward Sabrina.

"It gets better," said Sabrina, her smile widening as the ship swayed back and forth. They passed the towering cruise ships, navigated the dockyard and then angled out to sea.

Puzzled by her comment, Danny decided to wait and see.

"What do you mean, it gets better?" Alonso asked, unwilling to wait.

"You are about to find out," said Sabrina cryptically, turning away.

Danny followed her gaze as a man in flowing white robes with the symbol of Light stitched boldly across his chest in black thread crossed the deck, heading toward him. Despite the sway of the ship, the man appeared to be sure-footed. His hood was folded over his head, hiding his features. He stopped before

Danny and said, "Excuse me, Squire." His voice was deep and commanding, but polite.

Danny jumped aside, clearing a path.

The robed man nodded his thanks and moved forward; everyone else parted before him.

"Who's that?" Alonso asked in a whisper, once he was sure the mysterious man was out of earshot.

Taking his eyes off the robed man, Danny turned toward Sabrina, also curious.

"He is a Navi."

"What's a Navi?" Matt asked.

"You are about to find out," said Sabrina, pointing to where the Navi had stopped.

Climbing up a pair of steps, the Navi moved to the farthest end of the bow, a pointed perch that hung over the edge of the ocean. Shuffling his robes beneath him, he sat down cross-legged, rested his closed fists on the tops of his knees and began to chant in a language Danny didn't recognize.

"What's he doing?" Alonso asked.

"Just watch," Sabrina said, her tone hinting at her annoyance with Alonso's constant questions.

Alonso waited a little and said, "I don't see anything."

However, before Alonso could say anything else, the Navi's chanting stopped. His hands parted, releasing a swirl of wind that expanded into a twisting tornado around him. The tunnel of air caused the Navi's robes to flutter out as the churning wind ascended into the sky and disappeared.

"That's it?" Alonso questioned.

"Find something to brace yourselves against!" Sabrina yelled as she wrapped her slender arm around the foremast.

Danny had spent more than enough time around Sabrina to know that it was generally a good idea to do as she said. He rushed forward and gripped the railing. Looking around, he noticed that others were doing the same, including Matt, Chris and Doug. Alonso, however, refused to budge, he stood still, with his arms crossed over his chest.

"All hands trim the boat to the bow and brace yourselves!" the captain yelled from the rear, most of the crew went toward the front of the ship and grabbed handfuls of railing or rigging.

Alonso suddenly thought better of his judgment as he ran for the railing. However, he was too late, the wind picked up in earnest, gusting from somewhere behind the ship. The sails stretched forward and flapped in the gushing flurry of air, pushing the ship faster and faster. Danny, gripping the railing tight enough to turn his knuckles white, watched helplessly as Alonso

faltered and tumbled backward, the ship bounding out from under him. Flailing across the deck, Alonso stopped dead in the air when Sabrina caught his right arm at the wrist in an iron grip and hauled him back to safety.

The *Radiance* leveled off as she reached her peak speed. The wind kept pace, filling the sails with gusts of endless air.

"Trim the sails!" The crew jumped into action, removing all the slack from the rigging.

"Thanks," said Alonso in an unconvincing tone, rubbing his wrist where Sabrina had gripped him hard.

"That was epic," said Matt. "How'd he do that?"

"A Navi is a navigational wizard," said Sabrina. "But his main purpose will be revealed once we reach White Rock Island."

"And what purpose is that?" Matt asked, his interest piqued as he fiddled with his glasses.

"Why, The Eye of Darkness, Squire," said a deep voice from behind.

Matt turned to find the Navi standing behind him, the Navi's white hood still pulled over his head, hiding his features. Matt's face paled as the Navi placed a heavy hand upon his shoulder.

"Why didn't someone tell me that he was standing right behind me?"

A soft chuckle escaped the confines of the Navi's hood. He pulled back the heavy white cloth, revealing an inviting smile and bold blue eyes. "I am not one to be feared, Squire," said the Navi, scratching his short brown hair. "It is the Eye you should be worried about."

"But I thought the Eye of Darkness was somewhere on White Rock Island and guarded by Knights of the Light," said Danny.

"And so it is, Squire," said the Navi, turning his head in Danny's direction. "However, the Eye's evil cannot be contained to the island alone. The terrible power of the Eye is the cause of a storm that has raged around the island for hundreds of years. When it is time, it will be my responsibility to protect this vessel from the worst the storm has to unleash."

"So, the Eye of Darkness is the reason the Bermuda Triangle is known for causing ships and airplanes to come up missing," mused Matt, more a claim than a question.

"Indeed it is, Squire," confirmed the Navi. "Those without the proper protections, which I will provide, can become quite lost within the raging storm of the Eye. The Eye is both a curse and a blessing for those of us of the Light. It protects the location of White Rock Island, our home. However, it is a stain on this world, a blight that threatens to wipe out everything that is good."

"Why not destroy it?" Doug asked.

"Many have tried, my young squire, all have failed," shuffling in Doug's direction. "Wizards of all talents have studied it to no avail, and knights have wielded Bondeds of great power against it, only to fail in their attempt."

"So why keep fighting?" Alonso asked.

With an expression of shock, the Navi turned on Alonso. "What a strange question for an aspiring Knight of the Light. We fight, because we must, my young squire, for that is the price of the Light. If we do not fight, who will?"

Alonso shrugged in response.

"Be wary of those musing, Squire, for it is thoughts like those that have caused stronger knights than you to turn away from the Light." Dropping his intense gaze, the Navi sighed and said, "You are still young, Squire and experience is not on your side. You are a first-year, correct?"

Alonso nodded affirmatively.

"Then, you have much to learn, my first-year squire. I look forward to seeing whether or not your opinion has swayed after your training. However, right now, I have duties elsewhere that I must tend to. If you will excuse me."

"Wait, sir, what's your name?" Danny asked to the Navi's back.

"You may call me Nicholi Ormstead, Navi to the *Radiance* and Wizard of the Light. My young squires, your names are?"

"My name is Danny Firoth."

"Matt Mickler," fiddling with his glasses.

"Alonso Martinez," in a rough voice, annoyed that the wizard called him out.

"Doug Garrett," the wizard eyed him with a single raised eyebrow.

"Chris Greene," inserted Chris when he felt it was his cue.

"And I am Sabrina Drake."

"I see, Sir Tyramear's daughter, your father is a powerful knight, my dear."

"I know," maintaining pride in her voice.

"I would expect great things from the daughter of such strong Dragonic blood," said Nicholi with a smile. "I look forward to learning of your progress, Squire Drake. Good day, squires. Nicholi bowed, gathered his hood back over his head, and headed aft.

"What was that all about, man?" Chris asked, shoulder-checking Alonso in the side.

"What?" Alonso inquired, rubbing his bruised arm.

"Why would you say something like that?"

"What did I say?"

"Why keep fighting? Are you serious?"

Danny noticed that the conversation was beginning to draw a crowd, consisting of first- and second-year squires, a few third-years seemed to be in the mix, sporting Bondeds upon their backs or strapped to their hips.

"It is a long swim back to shore if you are not here to fight," said a deep British voice from somewhere within the crowd.

Danny watched the gathered squires part as a single figure stepped forward. His eyes were piercing and electric blue. He wore a set of long flowing robes, dark-red in color, similar to that of the Navi, but slightly different. A white band with the symbol of Light on it encircled his right arm at the bicep, sewed into the fabric of the robe and a single piece of plate mail hung over his left shoulder with the intricate design of a dragon inscribed upon it. Poking out from his back was the hilt of a sword. Forged into the form of a claw with four talons, the pommel of the blade looked like it had been cut from a solid piece of ruby. It glowed and sparkled in the shimmering light of the noonday sun.

"And who're you?" commanded Alonso, he had never been singled out so blatantly.

"I am Squire Vyce Ven Lasko, Captain of Dragon Army." keeping his cool, stepping within an arm's length of Alonso. "We are at war, first-year," he continued, not giving Alonso a chance to answer. "The last thing the Order of Light needs is a coward in the ranks."

Alonso's hands curled inward as he snarled in response to the insult. Angling his right fist behind him, he readied to strike.

The red-headed, icy blue-eyed squire stood still, his expression stern. Alonso's threatening posture was of little concern to him.

Before Alonso could lash out, Sabrina rushed between the two, shoving Alonso backward. "That would be a mistake."

"You would be wise to listen to your friend," instructed Vyce calmly.

Alonso bucked forward, only to be stopped by Sabrina's strong grip. When brawn failed, Alonso turned to his mouth. However, before he could get himself into further trouble, Sabrina stopped him there as well, covering his mouth with her hand.

"Enough," she commanded.

By no choice of his own, Alonso was forced into compliance.

Vyce never smiled and if he found Alonso's situation funny, he didn't show it. "I see. Your courage is limited to situations in which you know you will not have to fight. However, I assure you that the legions of the Dark and the creatures of the Shadow will not show you any mercy."

Alonso struggled against his restraint and attempted to say something through his muffle, those attempts were thwarted by the confining embrace of Sabrina as well.

"Should you complete the first year of your training and return for your second, you can find me in the Great Dome." The fiery-haired boy turned, walked across the deck and descended into the bowels of the ship.

Sabrina released him and asked, "Are you mad?"

"Who the hell was that?" Alonso's fists remained balled up in rage.

"He told you who he was." However, Alonso's features failed to recognize her meaning, she added, "He is the Captain of Dragon Army and a third-year squire. The shoulder plate inscribed with the dragon marks him as such. Vyce Venn Lasko was the first second-year squire to become the captain of an army and he is the last person you want as an enemy."

"Why'd he talk so funny?"

"Squires come from all over the world to attend the White Rock Academy of Illumination. His accent comes from his country of origin."

"I could take him," said Alonso. A whisper of amusement answered him, as those who'd taken an interest in the recent confrontation and the current conversation snickered at the comment.

Before Alonso could respond, Danny asked, "What do you mean, Dragon Army?"

Sabrina's expression relaxed, glad to be finished with the recent subject. "At the beginning of second year, squires are distributed into eight armies: Dragon, Lion, Phoenix, Rat, Python, Griffon, Horse, and Dog."

"So, as first-year squires, we won't be placed in an army?" Chris asked for clarification.

"Correct, as a first-year squire you will learn the techniques of the blade, tactics, history of the Light, Shadow lore, defense against magic and receive conditioning training. That training regimen will prepare you for your second year, wherein you will receive your Bonded and join one of the eight armies to compete for the Chalice of Light."

"What do you mean by compete?" Danny asked.

Sabrina turned toward him, "Each of the eight armies wage battles against the other in a bracketed competition. The winner earns the coveted prize, the Chalice of Light, which currently resides in the possession of Dragon Army." Turning toward Alonso, Sabrina added, "Vyce led Dragon Army to victory last year."

Alonso scoffed at the comment and shrugged his shoulders, as if he couldn't care less.

Danny nodded. "So, as a second-year squire, you'll be—"

"...Placed into an army to compete for the Chalice." excitement evident in her voice.

"Sounds kind of dangerous," said Doug.

"Injuries have been known to occur," confirmed Sabrina, "however, every squire who fights in the Great Dome is protected by an enchanted suit of armor. Few have perished in the mock battles."

"That's comforting," said Doug.

"You will feel differently after your first year," assured Sabrina. "Are you guys hungry?" she asked, before anyone else could think of another question.

Danny's stomach grumbled in answer. "I guess I am," he said, smiling as everyone turned to regard him.

"I could always eat," said Chris.

"Yeah," Doug and Matt agreed at the same time.

"Whatever," said Alonso, still nursing what was left of his ego.

"Follow me," said Sabrina with a smile, turning and crossing the deck of the ship. Danny, Chris, Matt, Doug and Alonso walked evenly behind her. She led them through a door, down a steep set of stairs to the deck below, which happened to be a long dining hall. One long table ran the length of the middle of the hall, piled high with a banquet of food. Smaller tables with intricately carved wooden chairs rested on port and starboard—left and right—sides of the room. The majority of the tables were filled with hungry squires eating their fill, debating which army would win the Chalice of Light this year.

Danny listened with active concentration and found that most favored Dragon.

"Help yourselves," said Sabrina, charging headlong toward the assortment of food after obtaining a plate at the end of the table.

Danny did just that, he helped himself to a fillet of spiced salmon, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes drizzled with butter and a few slices of freshly baked-bread. Acquiring a tall glass of chilled milk, he noticed that Sabrina had found a table near the bow of the hull and joined her. Moments later, Chris joined them, plopping down two plates, both piled high with an assortment of foods.

"Think you got enough there, man?" Danny asked.

"You can never have enough. Besides, I have muscles to feed," said Chris with a wide smile, flexing for effect. He picked up a chicken leg and dug in.

Alonso, Doug and Matt followed behind, sitting next to them and eating their fill.

Chris was the first one done; Danny nearly fell out of his chair when the larger boy went back for seconds.

His stomach full after the meal, Danny felt tired. "How long until we reach White Rock?"

"It will take most of the day," explained Sabrina. "It will be almost nighttime by the time we arrive. We should all get some sleep."

Danny agreed. He'd gotten less than a few hours of sleep the night before, going to bed late after the flight on Tyramear's back and getting up early to catch the *Radiance*. It was all beginning to catch up with him.

"Come on," ordered Sabrina, there are personal quarters for squires on the lower decks. We can rest there."

"Lead the way," said Chris with a grin of satisfaction as he rubbed his stomach.

Sabrina led the group to a side passage and down another steep set of stairs. Passing through a long narrow hall full of closed doors, they found an empty cabin toward the aft of the ship. Cramped and small, the cabin held six hammocks, strung up on both sides of the wall, with a porthole in the back.

"I call top!" shouted Alonso, throwing his pack into the corner of the room, leaping up to the topmost hammock. He landed with most of his weight centered on the right side of the hammock, causing the fabric to lurch to the left. He spun upside down as the force threw him into the wall, then he fell to the floor face-first, landing with a hollow thud.

A shocked silence ensued. However, once Alonso proved unharmed, the loud sound of laughter followed.

"Epic fail," said Matt.

"It's not funny," argued Alonso, getting to his feet, nursing his nose.

Oh, but it was. Danny refused to tone down the humor, his laughter almost doubled.

Alonso grimaced and climbed back into the hammock, slower this time. He turned his head toward the wall and kept quiet, believing that his silence would curtail their merriment at his expense.

Eventually, it did. Everyone followed Alonso's example and tossed their baggage into the far corner. Danny claimed a hammock on the bottom left side of the room and eased his weight onto the edge slowly, certain not to follow Alonso's tragic example with his own hammock. Danny distributed his weight and relaxed into the taut fabric.

Sabrina picked the hammock just above Danny and smiled down at him as she climbed up into it.

Danny sighed, thinking of Chris's recent words to him, his suggestion that Danny should tell her how he felt about her. However, this wasn't the place nor the time. Danny wondered where that place would be and when that time would come. Before he could think about it further, the events of the past two days, combined with the relaxing sway of the ship, lulled him into a peaceful slumber.

12

The Turbulence before the Storm

Danny woke up to the rough lurch of the *Radiance* as the ship keeled from side to side in a violent sway. "What's happening!" he asked, but he wasn't sure if anyone was awake to answer him.

"The Eye of Darkness," Sabrina said from above, twisting out of the hammock, landing with the grace of a cat beside him. Suddenly, her nimble stance faltered as the *Radiance* heaved beneath her, causing her to fall on Danny. She automatically put her hands on his chest for support.

The fabric of the hammock groaned from the stress of both bodies as Danny grabbed her at the waist. He could feel the warmth of her breath on his face and smell the sweet scent of her hair as her lips hovered dangerously above him.

"What should we do?" Doug asked.

Sabrina eased herself off Danny's chest, adjusted her clothing and straightened up, as if nothing had happened. "Go and see it, of course."

Danny nearly fell out of the hammock, the sway of the ship and Sabrina's proximity were having a rather negative affect on his balance.

Soon, everyone was awake, following Sabrina down the hall, stopping often to brace themselves against a wall as the *Radiance* swayed forcefully from side

to side. They reached the end of the corridor and ascended the stairs leading to the upper decks.

Passing through the dining hall, Danny noticed that the tables had been cleared and cleaned. He followed Sabrina as she reached the second set of stairs and went up them.

At the top of the staircase, Sabrina pushed against the door, forcing it open, causing a wail of wind to sweep past her.

Danny could taste the salt in the air as the gust carried with it a spray of mist from the ocean.

The *Radiance* was a mess of motion as the crew worked to follow the orders of their captain as he yelled from the aft of the ship. However, his voice was cut off as a jagged bolt of lightning split the sky in half, followed by a deafening boom.

The loud noise forced Danny's eyes toward the sky, a swirl of black clouds materialized, creating a churning wall of darkness. Within the raging storm, thunderclaps boomed, followed by more white shafts of lightning.

"We have to go through that?" Doug yelled over the fury of the storm.

"We're getting closer," Chris emphasized.

Danny noticed a distinct difference between where the storm awaited them and where the *Radiance* was now. The waters around the ship were choppy but within the dark clouds of the coming storm, the waves doubled, even tripled in size.

"There's no way this ship is going to last five seconds in a storm like that!" Matt pointed out, saying what everyone else was already thinking.

"We're all going to die!" Doug said, taking a couple of steps back in a gesture of hopelessness. He stopped as he bumped into something solid.

"Don't be silly!" a familiar deep voice yelled from behind.

Danny turned to find Nicholi Ormstead, the Navi, standing behind Doug, his face shrouded by the thick hood of his robes. Despite the heavy sway of the ship, his stance remained solid and confident.

"It is my job to protect you, Squire," placing a reassuring hand upon Doug's shoulder, "and I am quite good at my job."

"We're getting much closer," said Matt, wiping the speckles of water from his glasses, returning them to his head.

"Ah, so we are," said the Navi in a calm voice. "If you will excuse me, Squires, it is time."

Doug stepped to the side, allowing Nicholi to pass.

Danny intuited the *feeling* of a smile; robes concealed the Navi's features. Nicholi passed them, ascended to his perch at the bow of the *Radiance* and sat down cross-legged as before.

"Whatever it is he's going to do, he'd better do it fast," said Doug, just as the billowing storm swelled up just off the bow of the ship, sending warped bolts of lightning crackling out on both sides.

"I think I'm going to be sick!" Alonso said. He cupped his mouth as the *Radiance* rocked from side to side.

The wind whipped at the Navi's white robes, pulling the veil of the hood from his head. Upon closer examination, Danny noticed that his eyes seemed to be closed as he mouthed some unintelligible incantation. Just before the fury of the storm threatened to overtake the *Radiance*, the Navi went wide-eyed as a clear globe expanded from his cupped hands, expanding to impossible dimensions, enveloping the ship from bow to aft.

As if to test the strength of this new barrier, the raging storm engulfed the *Radiance* in a swirl of black clouds; it bombarded the ship with arcing streaks of lighting. The jagged bolts of light deflected off the protective sphere as the Navi navigated the ship deeper into the dark bowels of the tempest. Just beyond the border of the Navi's aura, waves of unimaginable size crested and crashed. However, within the globe, the sea remained steady and calm, a sturdy sanctuary in an ocean of madness.

"Now that was epic," said Matt, wiping the moisture from his glasses once again.

Danny had to admit that, despite the horrifying destructive power of it, the storm was quite beautiful.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Sabrina asked, moving to stand beside Danny.

"Yes, you just read my mind."

"If it weren't for the Navi's protective spell, this ship would be crushed in a matter of seconds," Sabrina pointed out.

"Is he alright?" Danny asked, gesturing toward Nicholi as he sat still on his perch at the bow of the ship.

"He is a Navi," explained Sabrina. "As I understand it, navigating the *Radiance* through the storm created by the Eye of Darkness requires his full attention. The storm itself is magical in nature."

"Where's Alonso?" Chris asked.

Danny took a quick look around, noticing that they were missing one of their group.

"He's over there," said Doug, as he pointed to the side of the ship.

Danny found Alonso slumped over the side rail, threatening to empty the contents of his belly into the ocean. After a couple of quick convulsions, Alonso turned and sat down against the railing.

"Are you okay, man?" Chris asked, he was the first to reach Alonso.

"I don't know," grumbled Alonso.

"He is suffering from seasickness," said Sabrina. "It's from the sway of the ship. The back and forth motion can cause some to become queasy, even sick, hence seasickness."

Alonso covered his mouth with his hand in light of her comment. Once the threat had passed, he said, "Don't say that again."

"...What, you mean seasick?" Sabrina asked with an apparent curiosity.

Alonso shook his head from side to side.

"Are you talking about swaying back and forth?"

Alonso's eyes went wide as he cupped his hand around his mouth. This time, he couldn't calm his stomach. He stood up, turned back toward the rail and retched over the side of the ship.

Matt was the first one to snicker, causing the mirth to spread, everyone burst into laughter.

Alonso turned around and slumped back against the handrail. He was too exhausted to argue or put up a fight. "I hate you guys," he grumbled.



The White Rock Academy of Illumination

The storm subsided as the *Radiance* passed into the pale glow of the mild moonlight, leaving swirling black clouds in her wake. The protective shield surrounding the ship waned for a brief moment before blinking out of existence.

Danny watched the fury of the storm rage on behind them, erupting in flashes of unseen lightning and booms of distant thunder.

"Look at that, man," said Chris next to him.

Danny turned and followed his friend's gaze. An island of solid white rock with high cliffs that soared well beyond the reach of the crashing waves lay before them. Their eyes were attracted to two landmarks, one on the eastern side and one on the western side. An enormous castle complete with two brilliant white spires stood far above the waterline on the eastern shore. On the opposite side of the island, a huge white dome, surrounded by smaller white brick buildings dominated a large tract of land. However, the most stunning eye-grabbing phenomenon was the surging storm; it encircled the island like the eye of a great hurricane. Above, the sky was clear and cloudless, revealing an assortment of distant stars. The tempest created by the Eye of Darkness fumed

with a dangerous fury only a few miles out; it was kept at bay by some unknown force.

Before Danny could finish taking everything in, his eyes diverted to Nicholi Ormstead. The weary Navi lifted from his perch. He climbed back onto the deck, legs unsteady and descended a couple of steps, almost falling. Danny shot forward, offering a helping hand; Chris and Sabrina did the same, moving to the opposite side of the Navi.

"Thank you, Squires. Navigating that storm has a tendency to take a lot out of me."

"Are you alright?" Danny asked.

After a moment to get his bearings, the wizard's smile widened as he eased the pressure of his weight back on his legs. "Nothing a long nap won't cure," he said, standing solidly on his own two feet again. "You are nearly there my young squires. You would do well to worry about your upcoming training and less about my wellbeing."

"Any advice?" Danny asked, taking two steps back, giving the Navi his space.

"I am no warrior, Squire Firoth, but I have witnessed some of the schooling you will take part in and it is not for the faint of heart. The trials for a Knight of the Light are difficult and taxing. If I could tell you anything worthwhile, it would be to stay focused and do your best."

"Thank you, Nicholi," said Danny appreciatively.

"No, my young squire, thank you. I look forward to hearing about you and your friends and how you fare."

"As will I," said Danny with a grin.

Returning the smile, Nicholi Ormstead gathered his robes about him. "If you will excuse me, I am in desperate need of a nap."

"Of course," said Danny, moving out of the Navi's way. Chris and Sabrina did the same.

Nicholi crossed the deck and went below.

"Sabrina, there you are!" yelled someone from behind.

Danny turned to find Rogen approaching at a brisk walk, his long blond hair fluttering out behind him. "Great," muttered Danny under his breath.

"Where have you been?" Rogen asked, directing his question toward Sabrina. He stopped in front of her, ignoring Danny as well as everyone else.

"We ate and then we took a nap," said Sabrina, indicating that she wasn't the only one who would be participating in the conversation.

"Oh," said Rogen in a flat tone, looking around, seemingly noticing the others for the first time. Shrugging, he continued, ignoring everyone but Sabrina. "I can't wait to find out which army I have been assigned to, hopefully it'll be Dragon Army. Captain Vyce looks stronger than ever. I'm sure he's going to win the Chalice of Light again this year."

"Yes, we had a run-in with him recently," said Sabrina, looking over at Alonso, who had recovered from his seasickness.

"I don't like that guy," said Alonso.

"Like him or not, Captain Vyce is one of the strongest squires in the school, perhaps even stronger than some of the full-fledged knights on the island."

"But he's only a third-year, right?" Danny asked. "How could he be so strong at such a young age?"

"That's just it," said Rogen, turning toward Danny, "if he's this strong now, wait until he gets older. He might even become King of the Light."

"...King?" Danny questioned.

"Don't you newbs know anything?" scolded Rogen.

"They are not Lightborn," said Sabrina in Danny's defense.

"Ah, I see, that explains it," said Rogen.

"What do you mean we aren't *Lightborn*?" Doug asked, his voice showing his annoyance at the possible insult.

"It should not be taken offensively," explained Sabrina. "Lightborn simply refers to those that are the offspring of Knights of the Light. Rogen's father is Sir Gallad Gilder, a Knight of the Light, making him a Lightborn. My father is also a Knight of the Light, thus I am Lightborn as well. However, since none of your parents were ever participants in the Order of the Light, you are not considered Lightborn."

"I understand," Doug conceded, but he didn't like the designation.

"And who's this King of the Light?" Danny asked, targeting his question at Sabrina.

"The king is the head of the Order of Light," said Rogen in Sabrina's stead, an act that caused Sabrina to scowl at him. Rogen continued without noticing. "The King of the Light is the supreme commander, charged with protecting the Eye of Darkness at all costs. He never leaves the island and it is said that he is the most powerful of all knights."

"Then why isn't he in the game of Knights?" Danny asked, pulling his card deck from his pack, presenting it as evidence.

Rogen chuckled as he said, "So, you play Knights, do you, huh?"

"We all do," said Danny confidently.

Rogen produced a deck of his own. "If we weren't so close to shore I'd challenge you all to a game and I'd win."

"You didn't answer my question," ignoring the other boy's bravado.

Rogen's smile wavered, then disappeared, as he shrugged. "Children are not the only people that play the game," he said, his tone becoming serious. "The Light does not wish its enemies to know all of its secrets."

"I see," said Danny, once again reminded of the gravity of his upcoming training. Beneath the thrall of this new exciting world, there was a war waging,

a war that had continued for countless generations; it could claim his life, as well as those of his friends. However, before Danny could contemplate further, a loud voice called out from the approaching shore.

"Ahoy, the ship—ahoy!"

"Ahoy from the *Radiance*!" a crew member yelled from the lookout, a small basket attached to the top of the second mast.

"Douse the sail and out the fenders!" the captain yelled from the back of the ship.

The *Radiance* glided toward the dock, a long structure of wooden planking that jutted out from the rocks around it. Danny noticed a wide path leading up a steep set of stairs, carved into the sheer cliff face, marked by a series of evenly-spaced torches.

"Fend the boat!" the captain bellowed. Like a threatened beehive, the crew worked swiftly, keeping the hull of the *Radiance* from scraping alongside the dock. The ship slowed to a stop, the crew secured the mooring lines. "Drop anchor and run the boarding plank!" the captain roared. Once the crew was finished, he remarked, "Well done, lads and lasses, welcome to White Rock Island."

Looking around, Danny noticed that the count on the forward deck had almost doubled, maybe tripled. The majority of the people gathered wore a collection of differently colored robes similar in fashion to that of the Navi's—or, some looked more eye-catching, like Vyce, the young captain of Dragon Army. Danny singled out a few who wore the insignia of a captain, a single piece of plate mail hanging over their left shoulder with the intricate design of their army inscribed on it, but he lost them in the crowd. Most of the squires present wore the defining armament of Bondeds; there were some, like himself who didn't.

The majority of the squires ran down the gangplank. Those with Bondeds strapped across their backs or secured to their sides crossed the dock and began ascending the stone steps. Those without Bondeds huddled around a tall wooden board decorated with pieces of yellow parchment.

"Come on," encouraged Rogen, urging Sabrina forward, "let's go see what army we were placed in."

Sabrina started to walk and then stopped. "You guys coming?"

Danny and Chris looked at each other fleetingly before following behind her with Doug, Matt and Alonso in tow.

Rogen led them to the tall message board, pushing his way to the front. After skimming the pages of parchment, he turned with a wide grin on his face. "Dragon Army!" he yelled. A few of the other squires turned to look at him with obvious jealousy. Moving back through the crowd, he stopped in front of Sabrina. "We are both in Dragon Army!"

"Perfect," Danny grumbled. However, before despair could overtake him, he felt Chris' reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"First-year squires, come to me, please," said a musical voice from somewhere to the rear, causing Danny to break away from his dark thoughts.

Danny turned to find a tall figure standing near the base of the steep steps. He wore flowing white robes, similar to those of the Navi. The only difference in his attire was a pair of black leather straps that crisscrossed his chest, holding an odd-looking contraption to his back. The device was some sort of scabbard, holding what looked like the hilts of seven different swords, their pommels peeking just over slopes of his shoulders. His head, shaved clean, sported a series of intricate tattoos, and his ears, long, pointed and lobe-less, marked him as an Elf, the race of the Long-lived. However, perhaps his most defining feature was the white wrapping that covered his eyes, suggesting his handicap. He was blind.

"Who's that?" Danny asked, "a Knight of the Light?"

"No," said Sabrina, "his name is Calador. He is the caretaker of the first-year squires."

Before Danny or anyone else could ask another question, a loud bell chimed twice from somewhere near the heart of the island, crisp and clear.

"That's the evening bells," said Rogen. "We need to go."

Sabrina nodded and then turned back toward Danny. "This is where we must part, Danny."

"What?" Danny asked, confused. "Will I be able to see you?"

Sabrina shrugged and said, "Possibly. Seek me out at the Dragon Army barracks. Training days range from Monday to Saturday, Sunday is a day of rest."

"Come on," urged Rogen, dragging Sabrina away by her right hand.

"Bye, my friends, good luck to you all," said Sabrina, pulled along by Rogen's impatience.

Danny's heart sank as he watched Sabrina turn and begin her long ascent up the white stairs. He wanted desperately to run to her and tell her how he felt, his feet refused to move.

"First-year squires, over here, please!" Calador yelled again, his voice calm, smooth and commanding.

"Perhaps we should join the others," said Chris, giving Danny's shoulder one final squeeze.

"Yeah," said Danny as Sabrina disappeared from sight, high atop the stairs leading up to the plateau of the island. Once she was gone, Danny followed Chris as he heeded the blind Elf's command.

"First-year squires! ...To me now!" Calador yelled again. Finally, a mass of new squires began to gather before him.

Danny found himself standing at the front of the group, the young squires behind him waiting quietly and patiently, except for Matt, who had difficulty standing still. He shuffled from side to side with excitement.

"Good. Now that everyone is here, allow me to introduce myself," said the tall Elf. "My name is Calador Varackice Con Dillion. I have been assigned to you as your caretaker. As such, I will fill the role of your mother as well as your father during your stay here at White Rock. Should you have any questions or concerns, come to me and I will address them."

Suddenly, a hand arose from the middle of the group, a boy with sandy blond hair.

"Now is not the time, young squire," said Calador in a polite tone of voice as the squire's hand drifted back down. "As I was saying, should you need anything, even a sympathetic ear, I will do my best to listen and to make your stay here at the Academy as comfortable as possible. However, be forewarned, the training you are about to undertake is quite difficult. For some of you, this is your first extended stay away from home. The combination of these two hindrances can become quite burdensome for first-year squires; I encourage you to seek me out should you feel overwhelmed.

"Now, with that said, I will show you the place you will call home for the next three months, your barracks." Calador performed a graceful about-face. He began walking toward the white stairs carved into the cliff face. "Please follow me and do watch your step."

"Is he blind?" Danny heard someone whisper from somewhere behind him.

"How can he see where the steps are?" another boy asked in a hushed tone.

"To answer your questions, I am indeed blind. I have lived upon this rock for just under a hundred years, my young squires, and as such, I have come to memorize all of its little details."

"Stop being rude," another squire scolded from somewhere in the group as they ascended the steps.

"Do not be silly, Squires," said Calador, still facing forward as he led them up. "My blindness does not hinder me, in fact I have become quite fond of it. If you have questions, by all means, ask them."

"How can he hear us?" the boy who had spoken first asked, his tone was no more than a whisper.

"He is an Elf, you idiot," clarified a spirited young girl to Danny's left. Her short platinum-colored hair revealed the distinct features of her ears, which were lobe-less and came to an acute point. "Of course he can hear you. Elves have much better hearing than you simple Humans," she added.

"That's enough!" Calador demanded, raising his voice. He stopped and spun around. "What is your name, Squire?" he asked, targeting his sightless gaze on the young Elvin girl.

"Briza Roon Hollinger."

"You are here to become a Knight of the Light, are you not, Squire Hollinger?"

"Yes, sir," Briza said with conviction.

"Then know this, Squire Hollinger, and everyone else working toward that goal," said Calador, looking at each individual in the group, "you all work toward a common goal as well as against a common enemy. Alone, you will not succeed, together you will triumph. Do not belittle yourself with such mundane prejudices. Whether you are Elf, a Human or something else entirely, all will need the others to survive. Is that clear?"

As one, the group said, "Yes, sir."

Danny watched as Briza's chin dropped an inch, whether in shame or out of respect, he couldn't be sure.

"She's beautiful," whispered Doug, causing Briza's head to perk up, look past Danny and find Doug's wide-eyed stare.

"All Elves have superior hearing," clarified Calador with a slight smile. "Mine is better than most due to the loss of my sight. That is why, my young squires, I can hear you so clearly. It is also why I can navigate this island so well. And, lastly, it is how I will know exactly who causes any mischief, should that event come to pass." With that, Calador turned and resumed his ascent.

Briza smiled before continuing her climb, causing Doug's face to redden.

An entire city was laid out at the top of the stairs, crafted from the same white stone that made up the greater part of the island below it. Two rows of tall, bulky buildings, constructed in the shape of small castles, separated by a wide brick road, stretched out before the group of first-year squires. Each towering structure was marked with a high flagpole that sported the insignia of the appropriate army at the top and a white flag with the symbol of Light just below it, both fluttering in the subtle breeze. The barracks on the right flew a black flag with the crest of a curled python; the barracks on the left sported a purple flag picturing a proud dog.

"Welcome to the White Rock Academy of Illumination," said Calador, turning, bowing gracefully.

"Where's the Dragon Army barracks?" Danny asked.

"Toward the middle of Army Avenue, young squire, the road we currently travel," said Calador, straightening his back. "We shall pass it on the way to the first-year barracks. Follow me."

Passing between the barracks of Python Army and Dog Army, Danny could feel the burden of eyes upon him. Some stared, standing just beyond the heavy wooden doors that marked the entrance to the small castle-like structures, the colors of their robes matching the color of the flag that marked their respectful

armies. Others called out to Calador like an old friend, their tones full of respect.

"Do you know all of them?" Danny asked.

"As I said before, young squire, I have served this post for many a year," Calador answered, blankly staring forward. "My memory is just as sharp as my hearing. There is not one squire within the Academy that I do not know, you will realize that once we arrive at our destination."

Calador led them onward, past the next two barracks. The one on the left flew a brown flag with the emblem of a sneering rat, and on the right rippled a yellow flag portraying a large lion baring sharp fangs in a roar.

The group of squires grew quiet as the members of each army looked on at them with a mirthful curiosity, whispering. Danny could have sworn he heard a few of them say, "Newbs." However, he paid them little heed as he followed Calador along the wide brick road. He noticed a deep red flag on the left, it sported a long-tailed dragon with vivid yellow flames escaping its mouth. Marking the army barracks on the opposite side, in order to remember this location, he noted the bright orange flag with a broad winged phoenix sewed into the fabric. "That's where Sabrina is," he said, not intending the comment for anyone in particular.

"You'll see her again, man," encouraged Chris as he walked next to him.

Danny wasn't too sure as he reluctantly passed the tall building.

Calador led them past the last two barracks. On the left, a light-blue flag portrayed a high-backed horse, the flag marking the army on the right was colored forest green with the image of a flying griffin printed upon it. Passing the two towering structures, the tall Elf led them onward, coming to the end of the avenue as well as the edge of the island. Before them loomed a building similar to the barracks of all the other armies but it was nearly double the size. Five stories high and bricked in the same white stone, the barracks flew a single white flag with the symbol of Light portrayed upon it in bold black stitching.

"Welcome," said Calador after stepping up a series of three white steps, turning his back toward a pair of large wooden doors. "Directly within you will find the common hall. This will be a place for you to relax, practice, study and socialize. On either side of the hall, you will find a winding staircase. The left set of stairs will lead you to the boys' dormitory; the stairs on the right will take you to the girls'. You have until the last bell to explore."

"...Last bell?" a sandy haired squire toward the front of the large group asked, a question Danny would have asked if the boy hadn't beaten him to it.

"Upon your arrival, you heard the chime of two bells, correct?"

The squire nodded.

"On the Island of White Rock, we mark time using an ancient method," explained Calador. "The bells of the main keep chime every hour on the hour."

He pointed toward the huge castle on the highest part of the island, its dual spires nearly reaching the limits of the starry sky. "On the island, the bells start at twenty-four chimes every new day and count down to one. For example, in about forty minutes, the last bell will chime. For those of you that are not Lightborn, this would be eleven o'clock. After the last bell, the cycle will start anew with twenty-four chimes, marking it midnight."

"That's confusing," said Alonso.

"I'd say it's pretty easy," said Chris. "You just count the day down from twenty-four."

"Precisely," encouraged Calador in a calm voice. "Now, as I said, you all have about forty minutes until the last bell. You may use that time to explore your new home. However, once the last bell rings, I expect you all to gather in the common hall. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" the group said, the combined voices melded into one loud acknowledgment.

Calador waited with limited patience as the group stood in silence, no one really wanting to make the first move. "Well, go on, then," urged the Elf.

The group of first-year squires surged forward, pulling the double doors open, entering the barracks.

Forced along by the mass of squires around him, Danny found himself shoved inside. Caught by surprise, he gasped at the sheer size of the common hall. The walls were bricked in the same white stone as the rest of the island; the ceiling was high and vaulted. The size of the room rivaled the gymnasium at school. At the end of the long lobby were a series of stained-glass windows that portrayed great knights of old. Two huge fireplaces, set alight with crackling fires, were placed on both sides of the room, bathing the pale walls in an amber illumination. Above, just below the ceiling, a series of small blazing spheres danced, lighting the hall in a mild glow.

"Magic," Danny assumed.

"This place is amazing," said Chris, plopping down on one of the many black leather couches that lined the stone floor.

"Unbelievable is more like it," Danny said, sitting down next to him.

"You think those balls of light are magic?" Matt asked, peering up at the ceiling.

"Indeed they are, young squire," said Calador from behind them. "They were created by Bartholomew, the caretaker of these barracks."

"Is he a wizard?" Matt asked, scooting forward in excitement.

"Indeed he is, Squire, you will meet him soon enough," said Calador. "However, I encourage you all to explore and pick out your quarters before the better rooms are taken." The tall Elf nodded, smiled and pointed toward a winding staircase, before moving off.

Danny and Chris exchanged glances before jumping up and darting toward the stairs. "Come on," Danny urged, forcing Matt, Doug and Alonso into a steady run behind them.

They found a room on the third level, toward the back of the barracks. The room contained six beds and a single large window that faced out over the cresting waves of the ocean, displaying the flickering lights of the raging storm beyond. However, before they could investigate the barracks further, a single chime of the bells signaled that their time was up. Placing their packs upon the beds, claiming them, they did as instructed and made their way back down to the common hall.

Upon entering the hall, they noticed Calador standing next to a man in long white robes with grey hair and a lengthy grey beard.

Calador waited to speak until all the other squires had gathered. A few minutes later, after the last squire descended the stairs, apologizing for getting lost, he began, "Good evening, Squires," he said in a calm even tone.

"Good evening," said the crowd of squires.

"I would like to introduce you to Bartholomew Mac Durmitt," motioning toward the shorter Human next to him. "Bartholomew is a Wizard of the Light, as well as the caretaker of the first-year barracks. He is responsible for the continual flames you see in the fireplaces, the lights you see above you, and many other magical functions featured within this structure."

Bartholomew responded to the introduction by nodding his head in greeting.

"He is a man of few words, but if you have need of him or have any questions on the subject of magic, he is always willing to lend an ear as well as his voice."

From within the crowd of squires, a single hand rose up in question.

"I am afraid now is not that time," instructed Calador. The young boy's hand descended. Calador continued. "The hour is late and the twenty-fourth bell will soon be upon us. There will be ample time for questions on the morrow. At this time, I would like to put names to your voices. Due to my blindness, I associate you with the tone of your voice much as you might the face of a friend. As I said before, my hearing is much sharper than that of a Human, even better than most Elves, and my memory is just as keen. So, starting here," he instructed, pointing toward Doug, "please stand and say your name loud and clear so that everyone can hear you."

Hesitating only momentarily, Doug stood and recited his name. One by one, every squire present did the same, and Calador acknowledged each in turn. Once finished, the tall Elf nodded, crossed his arms, and said, "Good. Now, if you all would be so kind as to get to bed. A long day awaits you on the morrow, and I am sure you must be tired from the journey. After the chiming of the eighteenth bell and before the seventeenth bell, you will meet here in the

common hall to break your fast. Get here later than that and you will not eat. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," said the gathered squires in unison, all except one.

"Does he mean breakfast?" Alonso asked in a hushed whisper.

Before any other squire could respond to his question, Calador spoke first.

"Yes, Squire Martinez, I do mean breakfast. Now, off to bed with you."

The squires dispersed, the boys ascending the stairs on the left and the girls on the right.

Alonso flopped down on his bed and said, "I don't know if I like that blind Elf."

"He's stern, but respectful," said Chris. "He reminds me of my dad. I like him."

"Elves are an amazing race," said Doug. "After meeting Syndil, I did some research on them. Did you guys know they can live well beyond two hundred years?"

"How do you even know if that research is accurate?" Matt asked. "Where did you look, the school library? Up until a few months ago, you didn't even know Elves existed. Nor do most people, whatever you researched was most likely based on fairy tales."

"It's because he has a crush on that Elvin girl, Briza," added Danny, slumping back in his bed.

"Oh, you have room to talk!" Doug said, raising his voice. "At least I said something to the girl that I have a crush on."

Danny's heart skipped a beat at the thought of Sabrina. Spurred on by Doug's jeering, he responded angrily. "Said something? More like thought out loud and she just happened to hear you."

"Hello," said a voice at the door before Doug could respond to Danny's claim.

All five boys looked toward the open doorway, a rather large brutish-looking boy stood there, peering in. Dressed in a tight white T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans, he sported short brown hair, blue eyes and a daunting physique, causing him to take up nearly the entirety of the door frame. With broad shoulders, sizable biceps that rivaled, if not surpassed, Chris's, and a puffed-out chest, he was an intimidating sight.

"Hi, I'm Anthony, I was wondering if I could bunk with you guys since you have an open bed?"

"Sure, man," said Chris, waving Anthony in. "The only bed left is the one in the corner."

"Thanks," said Anthony, moving into the room, tossing his belongings on the bed.

"Don't let those two bother you, we're all friends here," said Chris, giving both Danny and Doug a stern look of warning. "You have a last name, Anthony?" he asked, returning his attention to the newcomer, nonchalantly sizing the larger boy up.

"Bath," said Anthony, "my full name is Anthony Bath."

"My name is Chris Greene," added Chris, prompting everyone else to introduce themselves.

Twenty-four crisp chimes broke the silence, announcing midnight. Following the final tone, the single ball of flame floating in the middle of the room darted into the hall, joining the others, leaving the room bathed in the dim glow of the moonlight.

"I guess that means lights out," said Anthony.

"We should all get some sleep," said Chris, stretching out on his bed.

Despite his lingering anger toward Doug, as well as himself, Danny suddenly felt tired. He soundlessly agreed and fell back into the confines of the soft bedding. Although the exciting events of the day and thoughts of Sabrina danced through his mind, exhaustion overtook him quickly, forcing him into a deep sleep.

14

Looking the Part of a Squire

Danny woke up to the soft shake of a hand upon his shoulder. Coming awake with a squint, he looked up to find Chris towering over him.

"Get up, the eighteenth bell has come and gone," said Chris.

Beyond the single window of the room, the storm created by the Eye raged on, unending, blocking out the morning rays of the sun. High above the wall of black clouds, the deep blue sky contained a lone white cloud that reflected the missing light.

Danny yawned, stretched and climbed out of bed.

Suddenly, Danny found Doug standing next to him. "I'm sorry about last night," said Doug, extending a hand toward Danny.

"Me, too," said Danny, shaking Doug's hand in a gesture of friendship and acceptance.

"Is anyone else really hungry? I am," Chris asked.

At the mention of food, Danny's stomach began to rumble, forcing him to place his hand on his stomach. "I guess I am, too."

"I'm starved," said Anthony, admiring his reflection in the only mirror in the room.

"Let's head down to the common hall," said Chris. "I wouldn't want to miss breakfast."

Danny looked over his shoulder and said, "Someone needs to wake up Matt first."

After a few minutes of jostling, Matt stirred and sat up. "Has anyone seen my glasses?" he asked through sleep-matted eyes. He rifled through the sheets of his bedding. "Never mind, I found them," he said, laughing, he was already wearing them. Wiping them clean with his shirt, he placed them back on the bridge of his nose.

Together, Danny, Chris, Alonso, Matt, Doug, and their new friend, Anthony, descended the stairs to the common hall. At the base of the steps, the alluring aroma of freshly-prepared food greeted them. In the middle of the common hall, where the black leather couches had been the night before, there was a long wooden table heaped high with just about every breakfast food they could imagine.

"Man, this place just gets better and better," said Chris, rushing over to the table.

Danny followed behind, claiming a seat beside his friend, piling his plate with two slices of French toast, a large spoonful of scrambled eggs, four strips of crispy bacon, three biscuits drizzled with sausage gravy and a handful of hash browns. After a second helping, Danny sat back, resting his hands on his stomach.

"That was good," he said, to no one in particular.

Chris, working on his third plateful, nodded as he stuffed his face with a blackberry pastry.

Anthony had found a seat opposite Chris, keeping pace with him bite for bite, to see who could eat the most.

"Good morning, Squires," said Calador, standing at the head of the table.

"Good morning," said the mass of squires in a half-hearted harmony.

"I am sorry but I believe I said, good morning, Squires," said Calador again, raising the volume of his voice.

"Good morning!" everyone said again, the combined voices resonating into a boisterous response.

"Well, it seems that we are missing a few this morning," said Calador. His voice was quiet, so only a few sitting toward the front of the table, including Danny, could hear him. "In a matter of minutes," continued the Elf, resuming his commanding tone, "the seventeenth bell will chime. After this occurs, I expect you all to be standing outside the double doors of this barracks. We have much to accomplish on this day, do not dawdle." Calador headed off toward the boys' side of the barracks and ascended the steps.

By the time the seventeenth bell chimed, Calador had gathered three sleepy boys and two tired girls. He ushered them outside where the other squires waited, and, just as he'd promised the night before, they weren't allowed to eat breakfast.

"While you are here, you will learn self-discipline," said Calador evenly. If he held any spite toward the three boys and two girls who hadn't listened to his directions, his voice didn't show it. "Punishment should not be considered a means of cruelty, but a tool for learning. Learn from your mistakes and take pride in bettering your performance." The Elf waited but a moment for the message to sink in before he continued. "Now, please follow me."

Calador turned and began walking at a brisk pace in the direction of the distant, towering castle.

"I wonder where we're going?" Doug asked in a whisper.

"You lack equipment, Squire Garrett," said Calador, speaking first before anyone else could respond. "Surely, you did not think that you would begin your training with nothing but the clothes on your back?"

"No, I guess not," said Doug, confused about how the blind Elf had guessed his identity.

"Do not be alarmed, Squire Garrett, I have memorized the sound of your voice," said Calador, as if reading Doug's thoughts. "If you recall, such was the purpose of the introductions last night. Not only did everyone learn the names of their fellow squires, but I can now recognize every squire here simply by their voice."

"That's amazing," said Doug.

"All Elves have similar abilities," said Briza. The Elvin girl walked next to Doug, matching him stride for stride, sporting a slight smile in his direction.

Doug returned the smile, his face growing flustered with a deep red hue.

"Indeed," said Calador. "Due to my blindness, my sense of hearing, as well as my other senses, has been amplified beyond those of any mortal realm. However, to answer your initial question, we are currently en route to see the tailor. You cannot dine with the king without wearing the proper attire."

"We're going to see the king?" Danny asked, his voice rising in pitch.

"Indeed," said Calador matter-of-factly. "It is a tradition here at the Academy that all squires attend a celebratory dinner with the king before they start their training. You will also be introduced to your instructors during this time. However, as I said before, you must first be fitted in the appropriate clothing, which brings us to our destination." He stopped beneath a thick plank of wood with a needle and thread upon it. "Please, follow me."

Danny and the other squires followed, entering the large brick structure. Inside there was a line of men on the right and women on the left, standing

behind a series of high wooden tables draped with assorted colored pieces of cloth, holding tape measures at the ready.

"Good morning, Squires." A man stepped forward, he wore a flowing blue robe of the finest weave, complete with silver embroidering. His features were sharp, accented by his long black hair, which was braided into three tails that draped down his back. "My name is Mathis Charles Deandrow III," he said with an elegant bow. "I am the head tailor and I oversee the making of and the maintenance of all uniforms, including yours."

"Are you a Knight of the Light?" Danny asked.

"No, Squire, I am not," said the tailor with a slight chuckle. "My weapons consist of needle, thread and thimble. I am afraid I would not know what to do with a blade, even if I owned one. You will find that, like most cities, the population of White Rock is made up of many professions, not just knights." Mathis remained silent a few seconds before adding, "We all fight against the Dark the best way we know how, Squire."

"Now, if there are no other questions, we have much to do. The men and women you see behind me are my faithful staff. They will be taking your measurements this morning in order to fit your uniforms to you properly. Throughout your training, you will see my staff and I for alterations in order to ensure that your uniforms stay fitted, for your bodies will change. Some of you will grow larger and stronger and some of you will lose the weakness of your waists. In either case, we will make sure that you feel as comfortable in your attire as possible. Now, if you would, please form lines, boys on the right, girls on the left."

Danny did as he was told and stopped before a tall man with short brown hair.

"Your name, Squire?"

Danny said his name and watched as the man dipped a quill pen in a small cup of ink and scribbled it on a yellow piece of parchment. Then the man went to work, measuring Danny's extremities and jotting down the numbers, one at a time on the piece of paper. Once finished, the man smiled and said, "Thank you, Squire. You may rejoin your chaperone." He pointed at Calador, who stood quietly and patiently in front of the entrance.

Danny found a place on Calador's left side. The tall Elf didn't seem to notice. However, Danny knew that he had.

"Where are we going next?"

"One cannot be a knight without the proper tools of war, Squire Firoth," said Calador with a smile. "Our next destination is the forge."

Although Danny's curiosity felt far from satisfied, he waited silently for everyone else to get measured.

The moment the last squire was fitted and joined the ranks of the others, Mathis stepped forward. "Thank you for your time, young squires. Now, if you would kindly excuse my staff and me, we have much work to do in order to ensure that your uniforms are produced on time for your engagement with the king this evening. I wish you all good luck in your upcoming training and I look forward to overseeing your future alterations."

"Come, Squires," insisted Calador. He nodded at Mathis and then pushed the double doors open.

Danny noticed that the tailor nodded in kind, a gesture most likely lost upon the blind Elf.

"Follow me, Squires," heralded Calador, as he turned in the direction of a billowing column of black smoke that seemed to rise from the middle of the island.

"Where's that smoke coming from?" Matt asked.

"What smoke? I am afraid I do not see it."

"It's just ahead of us," argued Matt, squinting through his glasses. "Toward the middle of the..." He stopped mid-sentence when he saw the subtle smile appear on Calador's usually straight face.

"Forgive my jest, Squire Mickler," said Calador. The smile disappeared from his face. "It is the smoke from the forge that you see. It is where you will receive your sword and eventually your armor, as well as your Bonded once you return as a second-year squire."

Danny felt the urge to question the Elf further but he knew that it would do little good.

Calador led the party down a series of white brick roads, winding through a city created from the same stone, the toiling dark smoke growing thicker with every step. Rounding a sharp corner, they came to a crossroads, each corner sporting a high tower. Knights of the Light stood in front of each one, wearing armored suits of polished plate mail. In the center of the converging roads stood an intricate water fountain, the edges marked by four statues of knights kneeling in respect, their swords outstretched before them.

Danny felt his stomach churn. "What is this place?"

"...The Pool of the Mageknight. It marks the exact center of the island," said Calador, "and the location of the Eye."

"...The Eye of Darkness?" Danny asked, his voice growing soft with shock.

"The very same," said Calador.

"Then where is it, the Eye?" Alonso asked, his head darting in every conceivable direction.

"Deep underground, Squire Martinez," said Calador, dipping his head downward as if he could see it through the white brick of the road. "The Eye is guarded by Knights of the Light all hours of the day and night."

Creeping toward the middle of the road, feeling drawn to the fountain, Danny asked, "Why do you call it the Pool of the Mageknight?"

"Have a look, Squire Firoth, and you shall see," said Calador in a cryptic tone.

Danny stalked to the edge of the fountain, finding a place between two of the bowing statues. The water within was a clear blue and calm, resembling glass. Just beneath the surface of the water, and in the exact center of the pool, rested the most beautiful longsword Danny had ever seen. The hilt, made from what looked like pure sapphire and wrapped in silver wiring at the grip, sparkled as it reflected the rays of the sun. The deep blue blade appeared almost transparent; the length of the brand swirled with a series of softer blues, like liquid distilled into a solid form. From somewhere within the blade's depth emanated a faint light.

Danny's hand reached out to claim the calling blade, dipping into the water. However, his hand stayed as Calador's voice continued just behind him.

"It is said that only the Mageknight can pull the sword from the pool," said Calador, moving next to Danny. "Many have tried, Squire Firoth. All have failed."

"Is it a Bonded?"

"It is."

"I can get it," said Alonso confidently, moving to the opposite side of the fountain, thrusting his hand deep into the blue pool of water. Danny watched as his friend's hand passed through the glossy surface of the water, the disturbance causing the slightest of ripples. Alonso missed the hilt by mere inches, catching nothing but water. "It moved," he said, looking up at the gathering faces to confirm his failed attempt.

"No, you missed it," said Matt.

"Watch," said Alonso, trying once again, as his hand passed just beneath the hilt of the blade. "See, it moved."

"It didn't move," said Matt. "I was watching it the whole time."

"Then you try!" commanded Alonso, growing frustrated.

"Fine, I'll try." Matt adjusted his glasses and moved to the lip of the fountain. After pulling his sleeve up, he reached down into the water and stopped, wide-eyed with surprise. "It did move," he said, grabbing for the hilt a second time. Once again, his hand missed the sword by inches.

Chris decided on a strategic approach, dipping both hands into the water. However, his effort met with the same result. Keeping a calm head, he attempted several different tactics, all ended just short of success.

Rolling up the sleeve of his shirt and revealing a ripple of muscle, Anthony punched his right hand deep into the pool. A sizable splash of water was the only result; his balled fist missed the blade by mere inches.

Doug chose not to attempt it, his focus remained on the mystery that was Briza.

"As I said before, young squires, only the Mageknight may pull the sword from the pool. However, all of you are more than welcome to try."

One by one, every squire attempted to pull the blade from the pool and Danny watched as every attempt ended in failure.

"It's impossible," said one squire.

"It's just some kind of trick," said another.

"Would you like to give it a try, Squire Firoth?"

Danny felt the eyes of the group shift to him.

"You are the only one who has yet to try," said Calador when Danny failed to answer.

Danny moved back to the edge of the pool and peered just below its glossy surface. Taking a deep breath, he slipped his right hand into the cool water, above the sapphire hilt of the sword. Soft ripples flowed out from his intrusion in a series of tiny rings. Danny inched his hand toward the pommel. However, just before he could almost touch it, the tiny waves passed over the sword, causing it to appear beyond the reach of his grasp. Confused, Danny pulled his arm from the pool.

"I told you it moved," said Alonso, from the opposite side.

"It's some kind of illusion," said Matt.

"Well, it seems the Mageknight is not among any of you," said Calador flatly. "Come, instead of bobbing for blades, I shall take you to a place where you can simply receive one." He turned and resumed walking toward the thick plume of black smoke that drifted high into the sky.

The group fell in behind him. However, Danny hesitated, lingering at the lip of the pool.

"Come on, man, you can try again later," Chris said, placing a reassuring hand on Danny's shoulder.

"Yeah," said Danny, mesmerized by the beauty of the blade but encouraged to hurry with Chris' support.

Both boys rushed to join the others as Calador led them down the road.

The tall Elf stopped before a large building marked by a sizable wooden sign with a hammer and anvil painted on it. The structure was the obvious source of the smoke; there were two huge smoke stacks on the roof, the once-white brick stained black from the accumulation of soot. Two thick iron doors stood open in greeting, allowing for a full view of the workshop within, where a group of squat, bearded creatures toiled with glowing bits of metal and large hammers. Their labor produced a steady rhythm of clangs.

"Sir Bartlett Firebeard," Calador called out. His interruption caused the group of Dwarves to cease their banging and look up in the direction of the Elf.

"Firebeard!" called out one of the Dwarves, his voice deep and gritty.

Moments later, a short, robust Dwarf emerged from the forge. At his side, a large hammer blazed red; the pommel, grooved in an intricate depiction of flames, was crafted from a silvery metal. His hair was long, unkempt and fiery red, matching the beard that draped just past his belly, which was currently smoldering.

"Calador, me old friend."

"Your beard is on fire!" Danny pointed out.

"Aye, it does get quite red dis time o year," said the broad-shouldered Dwarf with a smile and a hearty laugh.

"No, my friend, your beard is really on fire," said Calador after a slight sniff and a twitch of the ear.

"By da forge!" the Dwarf yelled. He stopped in mid-laugh, looked down at his burning beard and patted out the flame. "I must've gotten a wee too close ta da flames," he said with a laugh, as a whiff of smoke swirled past his head. "Ya have me thanks, young squire. A wee longer and me prized beard would've been nутten but ash." He turned toward Danny.

"My pleasure..."

"Sir Bartlett Firebeard!" the Dwarf roared in a deep and jovial voice, "Knight o da Light and Master o da Forge."

"Bartlett Firebeard, my name is Danny Firoth, Squire."

"When addressing a Knight of the Light, it is a sign of respect to use their title, Squire Firoth," said Calador.

"Sir Bartlett Firebeard," said Danny, correcting himself.

"Firoth, eh?" Sir Bartlett stroked his beard in thought. "Dat name sounds mighty familiar. You a Lightborn, lad?"

"...No, sir."

"No matter, Squire Firoth, 'tis a pleasure ta meet ya," extending his stubby hand forward in greeting.

Danny took the Dwarf's arm in a shake and winced in pain as his wrist was nearly crushed by the strength of Sir Bartlett's grip.

"Sorry, ma boy, don't know me own strength sometimes," reading Danny's expression, releasing his hold.

"We have just come from the Pool of the Mageknight," said Calador.

"Ah, and was da Mageknight among dis here group o squires?"

Calador shook his head.

"Shame," grumbled the Dwarf, once again stroking his beard. "But, no matter," he said, shrugging off whatever idea had troubled him. He addressed the group of squires as a whole. "I'm Sir Bartlett Firebeard! I'm da master o dis here forge and on dis day, you squires will receive a sword forged either by mine own hands or da strong lads and lasses ya see behind me. You'll treat me

creations with respect, for a blade is no mere toy. These here hands," continued the Dwarf, raising his left hand skyward, "create works o art dat are designed for one purpose only—ta kill. Make no mistake, da weapons ya are ta receive dis here day are tools of war and should be treated as such. Are der any questions?"

The group remained silent.

"Good," said Sir Bartlett in a roaring voice. "Step dis way, please." The Dwarf turned and walked back into the forge.

Danny, being the first in line, hesitated for a moment before following behind.

Sir Bartlett turned and walked around what looked like a large pool of lava. The bricks containing the glowing amber liquid radiated a soft light, heated by the sweltering contents. Arranged around the lava pool were a series of anvils, where a group of Dwarves worked tirelessly, banging out blazing pieces of metal.

"Dis here forge was built on top of an active volcano. Da lava flows up from a fissure deep below us and would have blown dis here island sky high generations ago if it weren't for a few tricks we Dwarves used ta tame da volcano ta our will."

Waves of heat washed over Danny's face as he attempted to peer into the heart of the lava pool. His eyes watered; he glanced away from the scorching intensity, unable to bear the hot blaze. "How can they stand that intense heat?"

"We Dwarves possess a thicker hide den ya Humans, Squire Firoth," said Sir Bartlett, leading them beyond the bubbling lava, away from the banging of his kin. "Thicker dan dat of da Elves as well," he added, winking in Calador's direction as he led the group down a wide set of stone steps.

Calador kept any comments to himself.

Sir Bartlett passed through a pair of large iron doors, large for Dwarves anyway. Beyond the threshold, the huge room opened up with a vaulted ceiling, held up with eight thick pillars. On the opposite side of the room rested a pair of large golden doors, now closed. Displayed on various racks throughout the middle of the room was a collection of weapons in a variety of shapes and sizes.

"Welcome ta me armory, squires," said Sir Bartlett in a booming voice that echoed throughout the room.

"There must be over a thousand weapons here," whispered Matt, adjusting his glasses, peering about the room.

"Der is a bit more dan dat here, Squire," assured Sir Bartlett.

"Did you make all of these?" Doug asked.

"I got by with a wee bit of help from me kin, but yes, I see ta all da final touches of every weapon ya see here."

Before any more questions could be asked, the golden double doors across the way opened up and a smaller version of Sir Bartlett Firebeard stepped out.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the two were the pair of axes strapped to the shorter Dwarf's hip, the hefts carved from solid ivory, the blades crafted to resemble the head of a ram. The doppelganger closed the doors behind him and twisted a golden key. The locking mechanism caused a rhythm of grinding gears to rumble deep within the stone of the surrounding floor and walls. Then, he retrieved the key and secured it around his stocky neck.

"Ah, der ya are, Fredrick," said Sir Bartlett, turning toward the sound of the echoing doors.

"'Tis done, Father, da Bondeds have been cleaned and secured," said the smaller Dwarf as he crossed the room.

"Good, good," said Bartlett with a slight series of nods. A moment passed as he dropped his head in thought and stroked his beard. Then, he raised his head and placed a steadying hand on the slightly shorter Dwarf who had since stopped at his side. "Allow me ta introduce Squire Fredrick Firebeard, me apprentice and me son."

The other Dwarf bowed in greeting, sporting a matching fiery red beard, though not as long as his father's. "'Tis a pleasure ta meet ya, fellow squires."

"Are you a squire, like us?" Danny asked.

"Yes, though I am allowed ta train under me father in order ta learn da ways of da forge. Dis is me fourth year at da Academy as a squire."

"Do you belong to an army?"

"No, I am afraid most of me time is spent here in da forge, learning."

"Well, now dat introductions have been made, it's time for all of ya ta find your blade," said Sir Bartlett. "Spread out and find da best fit possible. Every weapon in here is different in some way, shape or form. Some are heavier on da end, some are heavier at da hilt and others balance toward da middle. 'Tisn't me lot ta teach ya squires technique, but as a master craftsman, I know a little. Just as every weapon in dis vault differs, so does da way ya will wield it. Once ya believe ya have found ya a good match, come and see me."

Unwilling to wait to be told twice, the group of squires scattered.

"And use some sense when handling me blades," added Sir Bartlett in response to the sudden chaos.

Danny moved off to the right, toward a rack of polished longswords. To his untrained eye, the majority looked the same. He chose the blade nearest him, one with a wire-wrapped hilt. Hefting the sword, his first conclusion was that it was heavier than he would have thought. Pulling it free from the scabbard with a soft chime of metal gliding along metal, he held the blade before him. The brand was wide at the tip and slender at the base, making it heavier toward the head. Danny concluded that this wasn't the sword for him, as the point wavered in his unsteady grip.

Sheathing the blade and placing it back on the rack, he chose another farther down with a hilt of iron. It felt cool in his hand and much lighter than the first as he pulled it free with the familiar ring of steel. The blade was slender and had the same width from base to tip, making it heavier in the hilt. With a simple twist of his wrist, he caused the sword to arc down faster than he'd expected, hitting the stone floor with a soft clang. Deciding that, once again, this wasn't the blade for him, Danny sheathed it and placed it back upon the rack. After trying sword after sword, he came to stand before a single stand with a silver-hilted longsword wrapped in supple black leather.

When he hefted the blade in his hand, the weight felt evenly distributed from the pommel to point. Pulling the brand free, he admired the blue tinged steel as it reflected the low torchlight. After a few practice swings, he knew that he'd found his sword. Making his way back to Sir Bartlett, he presented it as his own.

"What ya got der?"

"I believe I've found my sword, Sir Bartlett."

"Well, take her out and let's see den," encouraged the Dwarf.

Danny pulled the blade free.

"Hold it out in front of you," instructed Sir Bartlett, modeling the motion by holding his right arm straight out in front of him, as if he held a blade of his own.

Danny mimicked the movement and held his new sword in front of him. Sir Bartlett tested his arm with a few strategically-placed squeezes.

"Good," grumbled Sir Bartlett with a satisfied nod. "Now, let's see a one-handed swing."

Danny was about to raise the sword above his head and ready a swing, but stopped in response to Sir Bartlett's deep and rumbling voice.

"Wait!" the Dwarf grumbled.

Unsure of what he did wrong, Danny eyed Sir Bartlett, eyebrows raised.

"Safety first, lad," said Sir Bartlett in a softer voice. "Look around ya and make sure der is no one else dat might regret being so close t'ya."

Danny looked around himself completely, finding no one in the immediate area. Turning back to the Dwarf, Danny narrowed his eyes in question.

"'Tis a good lesson ta learn sooner ratha den lata, Squire Firoth. Go on, and give `er a swing," he encouraged.

Danny readied himself once again, hefting the sword above his head and leveling it. In one quick movement, he chopped the blade downward, causing a slight hissing sound as the sharp edge sliced through the air.

"Good," said Sir Bartlett, stroking the fluff of his red beard. "Now use both hands, lad."

Danny nodded and moved his right hand to the uppermost part of the hilt, gripping the bottommost part with his left. Once again, raising the sword above himself, he flashed the blue-tinged brand downward in a wicked arc.

Sir Bartlett stepped forward, a rather large smile forming upon his rough features as he placed a steadying hand on Danny's right shoulder. "Ya have a strong swing and decent technique, Squire Firoth," said the Dwarf. "Ya done well choosing dis here blade. From dis point on, she belongs ta ya."

"Thank you, Sir Bartlett," Danny said, sheathing his new sword with a subtle ring of steel, buckling the black leather scabbard around his waist. The weight of the blade at his side felt odd. However, there was a sense of confidence that accompanied the feeling.

Danny watched and waited as each squire went through Sir Bartlett's small practice session. Some passed, others were sent back to scavenge the armory for a better-fitted blade.

Matt chose a slender-bladed scimitar with a subtle curve, the hilt carved from ivory. Despite the limited bulk of his arms, he managed to wield the chosen sword with little difficulty.

Doug chose a broad-bladed shortsword with a wire-wrapped hilt. Heavier at the point, but light enough to wield without difficulty, he passed Sir Bartlett's challenge without problems.

Alonso went through several of Sir Bartlett's tests before deciding on a serrated-edged longsword. The golden hilt glittered in the soft torch light of the room.

Chris came before the Dwarf hefting a hand-and-a-half bastardsword over his shoulder, holding the leather-wrapped hilt steady in his hand despite its immense size. Unsurprising to Danny, Chris proved his prowess with the double-bladed sword during Sir Bartlett's test, handling the sizable sword with ease as he swung it downward in an overhead chop.

Anthony presented with the largest sword, a huge greatsword that nearly matched him in height. Gripping the two-handed hilt, he held the blade in front of him steadily, ready for the Dwarf's test. Swinging the heavy sword through a series of maneuvers, Anthony proved a worthy wielder of the blade despite the disbelieving expression upon Sir Bartlett's face.

Lastly, under Doug's watchful eyes, Briza selected a slender rapier, the blade long and petite as well as strong and quick, mimicking her own natural strengths. The group of squires gasped in awe as she put the sword through a battery of agile maneuvers, her technique perfect. Like a skilled dancer, she moved with unbelievable grace.

"Da blades ya now hold in ya hands belong ta ya now," said Sir Bartlett, addressing the group of squires once everyone held a weapon from the armory. "Der upkeep, care, and responsibility rest solidly on yer shoulders. Treat dem as

ya would yer best friend, for a blade is ever faithful and will never leave yer side." Sir Bartlett proceeded to lead them back outside, he said his goodbyes and sent them on their way.

"Where are we going now, Calador?" Danny asked, as he followed behind the tall Elf.

"Back to the barracks, Squire Firoth," said Calador. "We have to prepare for a banquet with the king."

15

A Banquet with the King

Upon his return to the barracks, Danny discovered that his uniform was waiting for him in a folded pile upon his bed. He found three more sets placed in his footlocker as well as a set of soft sleepwear. As instructed by Calador, Danny darted off to the bathing chambers and relished in a steaming tub of hot water. He suddenly became very aware that it had been days since he had bathed and the warm water felt relaxing and refreshing.

Returning to his room, he dressed in the clothing provided, slipping on a pair of heavy knit pants and a soft white shirt. Next, he pulled on a pair of matching thick socks and a pair of black leather boots. Finally, Danny put on the white robe, the symbol of Light stitched boldly upon the back in black thread. The robes, made from a delicate material, felt lightweight as he secured them with his sword belt.

"Not bad," he said, admiring himself in the mirror.

"I'm not so sure," said Alonso, pulling at the sturdy fabric of his own robes.

"I like it," said Chris, making his way between Danny and Alonso, looking himself over in the mirror as well. Unlike Danny or Alonso, Chris' uniform required a set of double leather belts, one around his waist as well as one over his shoulder, in order to hold the heavy blade he had chosen.

"I think they're rather comfortable," added Matt, finishing his uniform by positioning his glasses upon his face.

"We should probably join the others," said Chris, tightening his shoulder strap.

Danny, Doug, Matt, Alonso, Chris, and Anthony made their way downstairs to the common hall to join the other squires.

Whispers of excitement and curiosity filled the hall as the group of squires waited with a growing sense of eagerness. Calador, ever calm, stood at the front, waiting for the full complement of squires to assemble.

Danny and the others found two free couches and sat down, everyone except for Doug, he remained standing with a wide-eyed expression on his face.

"She's stunning," he said, eyes fixed upon Briza.

Danny turned and followed his friend's gaze, finding Briza standing on the last step of the staircase that led to the girls' side of the barracks. Dressed in the robes of her new station, she cut a lean stunning figure. With her lithe hand placed upon the pommel of the slender rapier at her side, she descended the last step with a graceful elegance. Danny could see why Doug was so smitten with her.

"You should be aware that, even from this distance, she can hear you, Squire Garrett," said Calador from the front of the group, his mouth warping in a sharp smile.

Doug's silent admiration switched to embarrassment as Briza's deep emerald eyes turned in his direction. Breaking contact, Doug took his seat on the couch, his face turning a rosy shade of red.

"That is everyone," said Calador a few moments later. "Please, follow me." He turned and exited the barracks.

Calador led the group of squires through the winding roads of the city toward the towering spires of the castle that loomed over the island like a distant mountain. The closer they came to the sizable structure, the more aware Danny became of its immense size. After a decent amount of walking, they arrived at the gates. Two large doors, at least twenty feet high and four feet thick, swung outward in greeting. The gates appeared to be the only way in or out of a fifty-foot wall that ran the length of the castle.

On the ramparts, Danny could see the reflective sheen of armor. Knights of the Light walked the wall in a constant vigil and stood at sturdy attention at the base of the gates.

Stepping forward, Calador bowed, placing the folded fist of his right hand to his chest, he said, "For the Light."

The Knights of the Light mimicked the hand motion and said, "For the Light." With that, they ushered Calador, as well as the squires, through the gates.

Beyond the mighty wall was a luscious courtyard of green grass. A single, wide, white brick road carved a path through the lawn with detailed statues of knights past, posing, bowed in respect, creating a corridor of pointed swords.

Calador led the group through the hall of heroes toward the towering structure of the castle. Twin golden doors greeted them, propped open with two Knights of the Light standing at rigid attention, one on either side.

"Good evening, Calador," said an echoing voice from somewhere within the inner keep of the castle.

Danny watched as Calador's ears perked up at the sound of his name, a small smile crossed his face.

"Good evening, Alamber," said Calador, as a slender man exited the golden doors and entered into the fading light of the day.

His hair was a rusty red; he sported a long beard of the same color, tied up at the base with a sliver of blue cloth. Descending the few steps that led up to the doorway, his bright orange robes fluttered out beneath him.

"Ah, these must be the first-years," eyeing each squire one at a time.

As Alamber glanced closely at Danny, he noticed a striking series of scars that ran downward across the left side of the man's face, from eyebrow to cheek and one eye a milky white. The other unusual feature of the man were his ears, which poked out beyond his hair and came to exaggerated points, the ears of an Elf. However, he lacked the striking bone structure that marked Calador and Briza as Elvin.

"Greetings, Squires, I am Alamber Ordvack Halfelvin, Head Wizard of the Light and professor of the magical defense courses."

"You're a Half-Elf?" Doug asked, though his expression betrayed the fact that it wasn't his intention to make the comment vocal.

"I am, my young squire," said Alamber with a smile. "However, such discussions must wait for another time. The King of the Light is expecting you."

"Of course," said Calador.

"If you would all please follow me," said Alamber.

"Of course," said Calador once again.

With that, Alamber pivoted on the balls of his feet, swiveling around in an about-face, adding, "This way, please."

Calador, along with all the squires, followed behind.

After a trek down a long corridor and up a set of stairs, Alamber led them through a set of ivory double doors. The room beyond opened up into a vast hall with an arched ceiling. On the opposite side of the room was a high-backed throne, upon it sat a man with a beard as white as freshly fallen snow. He wore a suit of ornate armor, his heavy plate mail as white as ivory. Around his brow, he wore a crown that glowed with a soft white light. Whether it

sparkled in the reflected balls of dancing light that hovered just below the ceiling or from magic, Danny couldn't be certain. His right hand was placed upon the armrest of the white throne and his left hand rested on the hilt of a golden sword, its details difficult to decipher from the distance.

A few individuals familiar to Danny sat on both sides of the throne, behind an elongated table covered with a white tablecloth, accented in silver embroidery. However, there were many that he didn't recognize. Danny recognized Sir Syndil Tribolari, Sir Bartlett Firebeard and Mathis Deandrow from the group.

The room contained nine large circular tables, each with the middle section missing in order to allow seats to be placed inside the ring as well as on the outside. Three sets of tables, descending in size, but similar in shape, were placed within each of the nine larger, allowing for ample seating. Each table appeared to represent one of the eight armies, leaving the last table, which rested in the immediate middle of the room, reserved for the first-years, or so Danny assumed.

Unconcerned with such matters at that moment, Danny found what he sought, the round set of tables marked with the dark red robes of Dragon Army. Searching the faces, he locked his gaze on the familiar features of Sabrina. She sat along the outer ring of the largest table; she smiled back at him in greeting.

"Your table is the one in the middle. Please be seated so that we may begin," said Alamber, ushering them forward.

Danny's stare lingered for a few seconds longer before he moved toward his assigned table and found a seat in the second to largest ring, next to Chris and Doug. He watched as Alamber bowed, excused himself, and found his seat beside the throne, joining the other heads of the Light.

The once-soft static of whispering died down to a still silence as the King of the Light stirred. Pushing himself up, he paced forward. With the confidence of an experienced warrior, he stepped up to a white marble podium. Placing his right hand on the stand, leaving his left hand to rest upon the hilt of the Bonded at his side, he scanned the room from left to right.

Danny could feel the weight of his eyes as the intense gaze of the king swept over him and continued on to the other side of the room.

"Good evening, Squires!" the king said in a boisterous voice that echoed throughout the room.

"Good evening," said the gathered squires as one in a half-hearted reply.

"By the Light, that will not do," grumbled the king. "I said, good evening!"

The answer echoed in a chorus of voices that surpassed the first attempt. "Good evening!"

"Much better, for those of you that do not know me," focusing his eyes on the first-year squires, "I am Sir Koltair Rillinan Voran, King of the Light. For those of you that do know me, I welcome you back to the Island of White Rock to continue your training to become knighted members of the Light. Starting from left to right, I will introduce you to your professors for this year.

"First, we have Sir Fredrick Ferdessa, he will be the acting physical trainer," said King Koltair, pointing to a large man at the end of the elongated table.

Sir Fredrick stood up to his full height of over seven feet and nodded in the direction of the first-years. His shoulders were broad and stocky, made to look larger by the heavy metal plates of his armor. At his side was a huge, emerald-hilted greatsword that was nearly as tall as him.

"Great, even here we have to freaking participate in P.E.," grumbled Matt under his breath.

"I have a feeling that we won't be playing baseball or basketball, man," said Chris in the same hushed tone.

"Thank you, Sir Fredrick," said the king, the larger man slumped back into his chair. "Teaching techniques, once again, will be Sir Syndil Tribolari," continued the king, extending his arm in the Elf's direction.

Sir Syndil scooted his chair out from beneath him and stood up. Danny found it odd to see Sir Syndil wearing something other than the silver business suit that he'd originally met the Elf clothed in. He now sported an ornate suit of silver armor with subtle blue veins. With a curt bow, the slender Elf sat back in his seat.

"Still filling the role of the expert on the History of the Light, Sir William Torjan," said the king.

At the sound of his name, Sir William, using his black-hilted blade as a crutch, groaned as he struggled to his feet. With a long greying beard and wizened blue eyes, the old man produced a slight smile before slumping back into his chair.

"Thank you, Sir William," said the king. "You have been with us for some time now. Your historic wisdom is most appreciated." After waiting for the old man to seat himself, the king continued. "Next, we have Sir Bartlett Firebeard, Master of the Forge and Keeper of the Bonded, and Mathis Deandrow, the resident Master of the Stitch and Tailor to the Light."

Danny's eyes flashed to the squat Dwarf who waddled out of his chair and held his warhammer high above his head in acknowledgment, followed by the slender tailor who produced a low bow.

"You both do the Light a great honor," imparted the king, motioning for both to sit. "Now, on my right, I would like to introduce you to Lady Gwinn Wellington. She will be taking over the instruction of hand-to-hand combat. Some of the more senior squires may remember her, she was a squire one-year

past. Despite her youth, she is now a Knight of the Light; those of you that do remember her may recall her exceptional skills in the unarmed arts."

With the elegance of a dancer, which reminded Danny all too well of Briza, Lady Guinn stood at the mention of her name. In white robes, she had the toned build of a warrior, yet she retained the shapely form of her femininity. Stern-faced, she placed her left hand on her hip and her right hand on the slender pommel of a dark-hilted dagger.

"It is a pleasure to have you with us, Lady Guinn," said the king, turning in her direction.

Lady Guinn responded with a slight bow, causing her long brown hair to dip in front of her icy blue eyes. After slipping her unruly hair back behind her ears, she took to her seat.

"Next, we have Sir Ranald Buttle, one of the foremost experts on the Shadow realm and the continuing professor of Shadow lore."

Sir Ranald stood up by placing a steadying hand upon the table in front of him. With sandy blond hair and piercing green eyes, he swept his right arm across his stomach in a low bow, shuffling his white robes to the side, nearly touching his head to the table. The movement caused a glimmer of light to reflect off the golden hilt of the longsword at his side. Just as quickly as he stood, he reclaimed his seat.

"Thank you, Sir Ranald, your studies and your knowledge are invaluable." After pausing, the king continued. "Keeping with the subject of the Shadows, may I introduce Sir Keargrow Pain, he will be continuing his instruction of the defensive arts against the Shadows."

Danny took in a deep breath as the man named Sir Pain took to his feet. Nearly seven feet tall, Keargrow Pain had a face full of scars and jet-black eyes. He wore a suit of black plate mail and held a large bastardsword colored to match. He was the most intimidating sight Danny had ever seen.

"He's a Knight of the Light?" Matt questioned in a low tone, verbalizing Danny's thoughts.

"Looks more like a serial killer to me," added Alonso in the same whispered voice.

"Thank you, Sir Keargrow," said the king, motioning the larger man back into his seat. "Next to Sir Keargrow we have Sir Filix Grogan, he will be instructing you in the lore of the Dark, and his brother, Sir Rilix Grogan, will be overseeing your studies in the lore of the Grey."

Both men stood at the exact instant. They were twins, with matching shortswords as well. Both men sported long black hair and matching goatees. The only difference in their appearance seemed to be their eyes. Sir Filix's left eye was a light blue, while his right eye looked to be a dark green. However, the colors of his twin's eyes were reversed. After waiting but a moment, as if the

movement had been practiced beforehand, both brothers gathered their white robes beneath them and sat down.

"Next, Sir James Wallen, professor of strategy and war."

A squat man of middle years stood and smiled. His hair was short, brown and thinning. Adjusting a set of squared bifocals with his left hand, he allowed his right to rest on the golden hilt of a shortsword at his side. After a slight twitch of the neck, he cleared his throat and produced a curt nod before slumping back down.

"Lastly, I would like to introduce Alamber Ordvack Halfelvin, head wizard and professor of the magical arts of defense."

Alamber stood, using a thick oak staff that had a glowing bauble entwined within the wood to assist him. Taking a slight bow, he folded the orange robes beneath him and sat back down.

"Thank you, all," said King Koltair as he swept his gaze from left to right. "Squires," after a slight pause for thought, "you are the next generation of knights. Soon you will inherit the honor and the glory of our tradition, but, more importantly, you will inherit the war that has raged on for countless generations. You must train hard, hone your skills and sharpen your blades. Be forewarned, times grow difficult as our enemies swell with strength. However, with hard training, a Bonded in your hands and a little luck, you will all persevere. But first we shall feast," finished the king. The last syllable of his booming voice echoed throughout the great hall. With two loud claps, he signaled an army of servants. With steaming piles of food trays and practiced precision, the attendants attacked the tables, setting them with roasted pork, chicken and turkey, rolls of fresh bread, mashed potatoes, corn, all sorts of desserts and more.

Realizing just how famished he was, Danny helped himself and ate his fill. By the time Danny saw to his final bites, the king had reclaimed his position at the podium and signaled for silence.

Once he had the complete attention of everyone, King Koltair began, "Now that your bellies are full, I suggest that you all get a good night's rest, on the morrow you begin your training. Work hard, my squires and may the Light always shine upon you."

With that, the king turned and disappeared through a side doorway, retreating from the roar of cheers that resonated into a crescendo behind him.

The other squires began to disperse as Danny placed one last morsel of chicken into his mouth and gulped it down. "You think I could talk to Sabrina?" he asked no one in particular.

"I don't see why not, man," said Chris between bites, his plate still half-full. He and Anthony seemed to be locked in a battle of consumption.

"I'll be right back," said Danny, excusing himself, navigating beyond the circular tables. Walking toward the set of tables distinguished by a collection of red-robed squires, Danny sought out Sabrina. He found her sitting in the same spot as before, in a deep discussion with Rogen. Danny sighed at the sight of the blond-haired boy; he was about to yell out Sabrina's name when a swirl of red robes suddenly blocked his line of sight.

"What do ya think yer doing, newb?" said the mass of robes, with a heavy Scottish accent.

Danny peered up and found that the bulk of robes had a flat face with dark red hair, brown eyes and a series of large red freckles.

"I'm going to talk to my friend," said Danny, with more authority than he felt.

"I dunna think so," said the red-haired boy. "Dis here is Dragon Army. It's not a place for newbs. So go back to ya own kind."

Danny's heart began to beat faster as he clenched his hands into fists, turning his knuckles white. His body temperature skyrocketed and his breathing quickened. Deciding against any rash judgment, he pushed his anger down and attempted to walk around the larger boy.

"What... ya did na hear me, then?" the boy asked, stepping in front of Danny, cutting off his path once again.

"Please stand aside," said Danny, barely keeping his anger in check.

"I dunna think so, lad, you'd best be turning round and going back to yer own table," said the boy, refusing to budge.

Making one last-ditch effort to keep the peace, Danny broke to his right in an attempt to walk around the boy once again. However, the larger boy stepped back into Danny's path again.

"Ya don't seem ta understand, newb. I'm not gonna give ya a choice dis time. Ya got till the count o three to turn back round."

Danny clenched his fists tighter as the boy started the count, "One..."

"...Two," the boy narrowed his gaze.

Danny's heart began to beat even faster, threatening to burst right through his ribcage. His body grew hot, his anger swelled.

"Three," stepping forward as time slowed to a crawl.

Danny watched, amazed as *a translucent phantom flowed out of the boy's body, stepped forward and shoved its ghostly hands right through Danny's chest.* The familiar vision filled Danny with a small satisfaction as time resumed and the larger boy surged forward in the now familiar movement. Anticipating the push, Danny dodged to the right and kicked with his left leg, catching the boy's right foot as he attempted to step out. Missing his step, the boy lurched forward and fell flat on his face.

Getting up faster than Danny ever would've expected, the boy's right hand shot to the blue-hilted blade at his side, the pommel fashioned into a twisting tornado. "Ya gonna pay for dat, newb."

"Stop it, Lieutenant Rigil!" a melodic voice yelled. Danny recognized Sabrina's voice.

Rigil gave her little heed as his hand slipped around the swirl of the hilt and pulled it halfway out of the scabbard. However, before he could pull the blade out all the way, a blur of movement, too quick to follow, caught Danny's attention, a bright silver gauntlet stayed Rigil's hand.

Danny followed the armored arm up to the smiling face of Sir Syndil Sartak Tribolari.

"Did you not hear the lady, Squire Rigil?" Sir Syndil asked, forcing the blade back into the sheath. "I do believe the young lady asked you to stop."

"Ma lord, Sir Syndil," said Rigil, dropping his gaze, kneeling.

Danny felt a tug at his shoulder as Sabrina materialized beside him, placing a worried hand on him.

"Are you alright?"

Danny looked himself over, shrugged and said, "I'm fine." After enduring her shocked look, he added, "It's good to see you."

Sabrina's face transitioned from concern to annoyance; Danny knew that he was in for a scolding. However, before she could respond, Sir Syndil broke the silence.

"That was well-executed," the Elf said, after releasing Rigil, intending the comment for Danny. "It is past time you returned to your barracks, Squire," he said, addressing Rigil, keeping his gaze upon Danny.

"At once, Sir Syndil," grumbled Rigil, after standing. Before turning toward the exit, he shot Danny a glare, "This isn't over, newb."

"Now, Squire," said Sir Syndil in a harsh tone.

Not waiting to be told a third time, Squire Rigil turned and stalked off.

"Squire Rigil is a fourth-year squire, a lieutenant in Dragon Army, quite capable in the hand-to-hand arena," Sir Syndil said, once the larger squire was out of earshot. "How is it that you, a first-year, managed to get the upper hand, Squire Firoth?"

"I would like to know as well," said Sabrina.

Danny became self-conscious as a small crowd began to gather around him. Danny decided to play it off as if nothing much had happened; he placed his right hand on the back of his head, smiled and said, "Just luck, I guess."

"You must be quite lucky then," a calm voice said from behind, thick with a British accent.

Danny turned to find Squire Vyce Ven Lasko, Captain of Dragon Army, making his way through the crowd.

"Professor Syndil, sir," Vyce said with a respectful tone as he stepped into the circle and stopped beside Danny. "Squire Rigil is one of my four lieutenants and quite skilled, Squire..."

"Danny Firoth," Danny added with a nervous smile.

"Squire Firoth," continued Vyce, turning toward Danny. "I find it hard to believe that he could be caught off-guard by the abilities of a mere first-year."

"Perhaps he underestimated me just as you're doing now," Danny shot back.

"Perhaps," Vyce said, without the slightest hint of emotion. "...Perhaps." He gave Danny his back. "Dragon Army, to me!" His deep voice carried through the dining hall. Assured of his command, he walked toward the exit without looking back to see if those he directed followed behind, which they did.

"I have to go," said Sabrina, her uneven tone betraying her desire to talk to Danny.

"What, just because he says so?" Danny asked, obviously annoyed.

"Squire Lasko is my captain," Sabrina said, as if the statement said it all. "Good luck tomorrow, Danny," she added, before turning and joining the rest of the red-robed squires of Dragon Army.

Unsure of what to say, he simply said, "You, too."

16

The First Day of Training

Danny stirred at the sound of the seventeenth chime. Rubbing his eyes and stretching out on the soft bed, he had every intention of going back to sleep.

Chris had other plans. He shoved Danny roughly, "Wake up, man."

Danny was almost awake by the eighteenth bell. Yawning once, he groggily dressed himself in the robes of a squire and strapped his sword around his waist. After waiting for Matt to do the same, they all descended to breakfast and ate their hearty fill.

Danny noticed that the three boys and two girls that had missed breakfast yesterday were now early. Calador stood at the head of the table; his ghostly gaze looked beyond as if he observed everything, despite his handicap.

The common hall was strangely quiet with only the subtle sounds of whispered chatter breaking up the constant noise of chomping mouths and clanging silverware. Like Danny, the rest of the squires were nervous about the coming day.

Pushing his plate away, slumping back in his chair, Matt asked, "I wonder what we get to do first?"

"I hope it's technique class," said Chris, fingering the hilt of the sword strapped across his back. "I can't wait to learn how to use this."

"Just, please, don't let it be physical training," said Matt with a slight smirk, pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose.

Before anything else could be said, the double doors flew open, a tall man stood there in full, gleaming plate mail. Danny recognized the man as Sir Fredrick, the knight assigned to give physical training classes.

"Seriously?" said Matt, recognizing him as well, he let out an agonizing groan.

Sir Fredrick turned and closed both doors behind him, revealing the huge greatsword that lined his broad back. Turning back toward the curious stares of the squires, he bellowed a deep-toned command: "Stand to!"

Danny watched as a few squires, including Briza, jumped up, locked their heels together, positioned their arms at their sides and held their heads up high, looking forward. Others looked on in confusion as Sir Fredrick stalked to the edge of the table. "Look to the more experienced of your group!" Sir Fredrick yelled, his throaty voice echoing throughout the hall. "When I say stand to, you should look like this," he said, rounding the table, coming to stand next to Briza. "This young squire is the perfect example of what you should all look like when I call you to attention."

A small smirk crossed Briza's face in light of the compliment.

"Well, what are you waiting for, an invitation?" Sir Fredrick barked. "Stand to!"

Not waiting to be told a third time, every squire in the hall stood and went rigid in the pose exemplified by Briza.

"Better," grumbled Sir Fredrick as he perused the stance of every squire, walking around the common hall. "Arms at your side," he corrected one squire. "Chin up," he said to another. Completing his circle, he came to stand next to Calador at the head of the table. "This is a sorry lot," he said to the Elf, his eyes remained focused on the mass of squires.

"They can be taught."

"It seems there are less and less Lightborn every year."

"Then it is up to us to see that these select few carry on the tradition."

Sir Fredrick grunted in response. "I am Sir Fredrick Ferdessa, Knight of the Light, professor of physical training!" he yelled. "From this point forward, your bodies belong to me and I will mold them to my heart's desire. Rest assured, by the time I am done with you, you will be agile and strong. If you wish to stay on my good side, something that I assure you is in your best interest, you need do only one thing, never give up. I will push you to your limits and further. I will force you to endure pain, the likes of which you have never felt. Do not give up. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir Fredrick," the group of squires said halfheartedly.

"By the Light, say it like you *mean* it!" bellowed Sir Fredrick, his voice booming like a thunderclap.

"Yes, Sir Fredrick!" every squire yelled in a harmonious burst of sound.

Sir Fredrick grunted, placed his hands on his hips, and said, "That will have to do." After a moment, he continued, "The position you currently find yourself in is known as a stance of readiness. You will assume this position whenever you hear the command, stand to! You will come to know this position well, I suggest you take a moment to allow the placement of your body to sink in." Allowing a deepening silence to spread throughout the hall, Sir Fredrick gave the squires thirty seconds to digest his words as well as breakfast.

"Good, in a matter of minutes, your training will begin. We will start the day off with a light run, followed by an exercise designed to build the muscles you will need to wield those blades properly. Are there any questions before we begin?"

Danny looked to his left as Matt's right hand trembled into the air.

"Yes?"

"I'm Squire..." Matt began, only to be interrupted by Sir Fredrick.

"I care not for your names!" Sir Fredrick yelled, addressing every squire in the hall. "Words and titles do not impress me, actions impress me. I shall learn who you are through the strength and prowess you show me, nothing more, nothing less. Now, with that said, by all means, ask your question, Squire."

Matt hesitated.

"Perhaps, I have already answered your question. Is this true, Squire?"

Matt shook his head from side to side.

"Then, speak now!"

"Should we..." Matt started again in a hushed tone.

"Speak up, Squire!" Sir Fredrick barked, interrupting again.

Clearing his throat and adjusting his glasses, Matt tried a third time in a louder voice. "Should we leave our swords in our rooms for the run, sir?"

Sir Fredrick stared at Matt for what seemed like an eternity before bursting into a hearty fit of laughter.

Unsure of the preferred response, Matt looked to Danny for encouragement. However, Danny was just as confused; he shrugged in response.

"This guy is nuts," Doug whispered.

"I never thought I'd say it, but I'd much rather have Mr. Ingram here than him," said Danny in the same quiet voice.

"I kind of like him," said Chris.

"Me, too," said Anthony.

Before anyone else could comment, Sir Fredrick's expression of amusement vanished; his features returned to the stern expression he wore previously. Leveling his intimidating gaze toward Matt, he said, "No, Squire, I am afraid you

will need your weapon for the run. You see, a Knight of the Light keeps his blade with him at all times. Your weapon is your life. It is an extension of your body, where your body goes, so does your blade." Sir Fredrick allowed his stare to sweep across the rest of the squires as he asked, "Are there any other questions?"

Silence was his answer.

"Good, then fall out and form two lines facing the Great Dome." Many hesitated, causing him to insist with a forceful, "*Now!*"

Unwilling to wait for the third command, the rest of the squires joined the others just outside the double doors of the barracks. Chaotically, at first, the group of squires melded into two lines. Danny found a place toward the back, with Chris behind him, Matt in front of him, Doug beside him and Alonso and Anthony finding a spot in the rear.

The sun, blocked by the swirling black clouds formed by the Eye, lingered somewhere out of sight; the only hint of its presence was the morning amber light that littered the blue atmosphere above.

"Stand to!" Sir Fredrick commanded. He strolled from the barracks and made his way down each line in turn. With a jerk here and a soft shove there, he forced everyone into the proper formation, straightening each line perfectly. Once satisfied, he took his position at the head of the columns. "We have a mile run ahead of us, Squires. Some of you are not used to this kind of training, many of you will have no choice but to show your weakness. Jog, walk or crawl, if you have to, but do not give up. The rest of the group must set their pace to the slowest member, for a chain is only as strong as the weakest link. Are there any questions before we begin?"

"Shouldn't we stretch before running?" a familiar voice asked from beside Danny.

Danny turned to find that Doug had stepped out of line to ask his question.

Sir Fredrick paced evenly toward Doug, stopping within striking distance of the much smaller boy. Only then did he answer with a question of his own. "Tell me, Squire, were I your enemy, do you think I would allow you the time to stretch before I attacked?"

"I don't know you well enough to answer that, Sir Fredrick," said Doug in an even honest tone.

A small smile crossed Sir Fredrick's face. "...A fair enough answer, Squire." The tall knight studied Doug for a moment before continuing. "Yes, I would allow such time as is needed to prepare for I am a Knight of the Light and I fight with honor. However, our enemies are not Knights of the Light and they will not fight with honor. Your body must learn to react without preparedness. This cannot be taught by words, it must be learned through muscle memory, experience, discipline and hard work."

"So . . . you're saying that we aren't going to stretch?"

"Fall back in line, Squire, for we are wasting good daylight!"

Reluctantly, Doug obeyed the command, his face showing the resolve to argue. He kept his tongue.

Sir Fredrick strode back to the head of the two lines, his suit of plate mail jingling with each stride.

"Is he going to run in that armor?" whispered Alonso.

"He's insane," commented Doug.

"I still like him," said Chris.

"Me, too," agreed Anthony.

Unsure of his own feelings on the subject, Danny kept any comments to himself.

"Are there any other questions?" Sir Fredrick asked, turning back to face the formation of squires. When no response was forthcoming, he put his hands on his hips and said, "Good. Then I will assume that you are ready."

The only thing Danny was quite sure of was that he was definitely *not* ready. However, once again, he kept that fact to himself.

Doug and Matt, on the other hand, groaned in reluctance as Sir Fredrick took off at a brisk run, the two columns of squires followed reluctantly behind him.

A mile later, Sir Fredrick slowed to a walk before stopping in front of a towering curve that formed the base of the Great Dome. Huffing and puffing, the once-straight lines of squires, now chaotic and disorganized, happily stopped dead in their tracks.

Danny slumped over, placing his hands on his knees as his body begged for air.

Chris, Alonso and Anthony, all three used to training, looked only somewhat winded as they took long deep breaths.

Matt and Doug were nearly on their last leg as they slumped to the ground and sprawled out prone. They weren't alone, others followed suit. During the mile-long trek, both had fallen behind at least once, causing the group to slow, a fact that most didn't seem to mind.

"A decent first run," said Sir Fredrick, turning to face the group.

Danny noticed that, despite wearing a suit of plate mail and carrying a Bonded greatsword, Sir Fredrick didn't even seem to be winded in the least. His breathing was slow and calm, as if he had just taken a leisurely stroll around the block.

"Who can tell me where we are?"

Briza's slender arm came up in response.

"Yes, Squire," Sir Fredrick acknowledged, pointing Briza out from the rest of the squires.

"The Great Dome, Sir Fredrick," she said. Her voice was calm and her breathing was focused, she, too, had been un-affected by the run.

"And what is the Great Dome used for?"

Briza's hand shot up once again. However, Sir Fredrick called upon another squire, a boy with brown hair who was standing toward the front.

"The Great Dome is where the eight armies compete in mock battles," said the squire through haggard breaths.

"Compete for what?" Sir Fredrick asked.

Briza's hand ascended once again.

With no other choice in sight, Sir Fredrick called upon her.

"...The Chalice of Light, Sir Fredrick."

"Do any of you wish to be a member of the army that eventually wins the Chalice of Light?"

"Yes," said the mass of squires, some with a groan and others whispering. The defining voice belonged to Briza.

"I will attribute such a weak response to your current conditions, Squires," said Sir Fredrick, crossing his arms. "If you so desire to earn the Chalice of Light, it begins right here, right now. Train hard and become strong." After waiting for a moment in order to allow his message to sink in, he began again. "The Great Dome is made up of five inner chambers. The main chamber, located in the middle, the largest of the five, is used to determine which of the eight armies is worthy enough to receive the Chalice of Light through a series of simulated battles. The other four chambers are used for training; it is within one of these four chambers that I will introduce you to the weapon you carry. Now, stand to!"

Caught off-guard by the sudden command, many of the squires, including Matt and Doug, rose to their feet too slow and assumed the recently learned position.

"I am afraid that simply will not do, Squires." Sir Fredrick frowned. "You two, you, and you three," he said, pointing to six squires in particular, two of which were Matt and Doug, "you all look very tired," he said in a mockingly sympathetic voice. "Please return to your resting positions on the ground."

Matt and Doug reluctantly followed the actions of the other four squires and sat back down.

"Better?" Sir Fredrick asked in a soft voice. However, before any of the six could even contemplate an answer, he yelled out, "Stand to!"

Quicker than Danny would've thought possible, Doug and Matt jumped up and fashioned their bodies into the appropriate position.

Sir Fredrick smiled widely. "Good. Now that you are all warmed up, we can really begin."

"The run was just a warm-up?" whispered Matt, his tone full of despair.

"I'm way past warmed up," said Doug in the same hushed tone.

"...To me, Squires!" Sir Fredrick yelled, marching off toward a pair of white doors, hauling them open. "...This way!"

Upon entering the Great Dome, Danny noted a high, sloping ceiling and a vast courtyard full of rich green grass. However, the most striking feature within was a series of small boulders placed in ascending rows from smallest to largest. The smallest were around the size of a watermelon, while the larger ones were about the size of a compact car.

"Pick a stone, Squires," said Sir Fredrick, closing the doors behind him. "I suggest that you choose one according to the size of the blade you wield. For example, those of you with lighter weapons, rapiers and scimitars, should keep in mind the option of one of the smaller stones. For those of you with heavier blades, bastardwords or greatswords, it would be more beneficial for you to choose a larger stone."

"What'll we be doing with the stone we choose, Sir Fredrick?" Doug asked.

"I shall make that clear to all of you after your stones have been chosen, Squire."

If Danny had learned anything since coming to the island of White Rock, it was that anything could happen next. Unsure of the purpose behind this exercise, he moved among the rocks and found a medium-sized boulder, its height barely reaching his knees.

Chris and Anthony moved down the rocks in ascending order. Both found boulders that came to their waists.

Matt and Doug both found smaller-sized stones toward the opposite end, while Alonso found one similar in size to the one Danny had chosen.

Briza moved among the stones with a smile fixed upon her face, as if she already knew what to expect and how to confront it as well. With sure steps, she stopped behind a large rock of a height that surpassed her knees and stopped midway to her thighs.

"Good," said Sir Fredrick, after every squire present had chosen a stone. "Most of you have chosen wisely. Now, draw your blades."

Everyone, except for Briza, hesitated, causing the lonely ring of a single steel blade slipping from the sheath to echo throughout the huge chamber.

Chris and Danny were next, pulling their own blades free. Everyone else mimicked them; the training chamber of the Great Dome rang out with a chiming crescendo of steel sliding against steel.

"Good," said Sir Fredrick. "Now, cut the stone in half."

"That's impossible," said Doug before anyone even attempted to try.

Sir Fredrick's expression remained serious. "Is it?"

"It would take at least a week to chop through this rock," argued Doug.

"You think so, my young squire?" Sir Fredrick asked, walking toward one of the largest boulders in the chamber. "Then, I shall demonstrate." He stopped before a stone that nearly matched him in his seven feet of height. With the song of steel, he pulled his greatsword free. The thick, naked blade glittered as if a thousand diamonds lay embedded within the steel.

"I would like to introduce all of you to, Wartok, my Bonded," he said, hefting the huge blade upon his right shoulder and holding it steady with a single hand. "Watch carefully." He gripped the emerald-encrusted hilt in both hands and positioned the heavy blade overhead. Taking a single step forward, sweeping Wartok in a downward arc, the edge of the sword blinked through the stone and ended in a poised position at Sir Fredrick's left side. He took a couple of retreating steps and sheathed the blade before repositioning it upon his back.

"But the stone is still whole," observed Doug.

"Is it, Squire?" Sir Fredrick asked, raising his right leg and stomping once upon the ground. A sidelong cut appeared on the boulder as the top half slid free, thudding to the ground at an angle.

"That's impossible," said Doug.

"Epic," Matt piped up loudly, using his glasses as a magnifying glass to get a better look.

"It is not impossible, nor is it very... epic, such feats will be like child's play once all of you are fully trained."

"But, Sir Fredrick, you're using a Bonded," said Danny. "All we have are basic weapons."

"Then give me your sword, Squire, and I shall demonstrate once again."

Unsure, delaying for a moment, Danny walked within arm's reach of the towering knight, offering his blade.

Sir Fredrick took the longsword without a second thought. "Stand clear, Squire," he said, motioning Danny away. Testing its balance, he swung the sword. Once satisfied, he bent down, gripped the top chunk of rock that he'd just cut in half and propped it up. Opening with a sidelong cut, then an overhead chop, ending with an upward arc, he sliced the bowl-shaped boulder into six separate pieces as easily as he might cut the air. The slabs of stone tumbled at his feet as he turned, walked within striking distance of Danny and offered the longsword to him, hilt first.

"As I said before, it is not the blade, Squire. It is the mind, heart, body, arm and hand wielding it." He locked his gaze with Danny's shocked stare. "Now," he said, overlooking Danny and acknowledging the other squires, "you all have stones to cut. I suggest you get to it."

Danny took his blade back, amazed by what he'd just witnessed. He tested the sword in his grip as if he was seeing it for the first time. All around him, the noise of steel clanging against stone rang out in crescendos that sent tingles

down his spine. Shaken from his self-doubts, Danny returned to his chosen stone, intent on cutting it in two.

17

The Way of the Sword

W

ith bruised and calloused hands, Danny, along with all the other first-year squires, followed Sir Fredrick to the building which he bid them enter. Sore and tired, Danny funneled through the wooden double doors.

Danny had failed to cut his stone in half, chipping away small slivers to within about the midway point of the boulder. Briza was the only squire who'd succeeded, dealing her stone a lethal blow on the fifth try. Anthony had followed in a close second, slumping down beside the boulder that had been nearly his own size with a cleft one-third of the way through. Chris was third, taking two final swipes after Anthony had given up, leaving Matt, Alonso and Doug nearly the last to finish, with their stones looking unscathed. Many of the other squires had fallen somewhere in between.

Thinking about the exercise, Danny looked down to his side, where his longsword rested in its sheath. He was amazed that even after clanging against stone, the blade looked unblemished. Truly, Sir Bartlett Firebeard, the master smith, and the Dwarves of the Forge were skilled experts of their craft.

"Please, take a seat within the circle," said an inviting familiar voice.

Pulled from his thoughts, Danny peered up to find Sir Syndil Tribolari standing before him. The Elf stood still and steady in the center of an intricate

circle grooved into the stone floor. He wore the same silver business suit Danny had first encountered him in during his testing, a day that now seemed so long ago.

As if noticing the large room for the first time, Danny saw a vast assortment of bladed weapons lining the walls, ranging from daggers to greatswords, as well as pole arms, arranged from shortest and smallest to the longest and largest.

"Thank you, Sir Fredrick, I shall take it from here," said Sir Syndil, giving the other Knight of the Light a curt graceful bow.

Sir Fredrick grunted as he nodded and closed the doors in his wake.

"Please, find a seat within the circle," said Sir Syndil, his tone polite and patient.

Danny took a quick moment to check out the carved circle which the Elf indicated, noting strange runes written in a language unknown to him. Within the circumference, a pair of etched triangles rested just off-center, mirroring each other on opposite sides.

Sir Syndil waited until everyone was seated before he spoke, "Good afternoon, Squires. My name is Sir Syndil Sartak Tribolari, Knight of the Light, your instructor in the techniques of the blade. Within these walls, I will teach you the proper handling of the weapons you currently keep on your person. Be forewarned, I am patient, but I am also a perfectionist. I will work tirelessly to make sure that your technique is flawless. I only ask that you return the favor. I assume that Sir Fredrick had you hacking at stones this day?"

A low moan erupted from the group of squires.

"A strong sword arm is a good tool," continued Sir Syndil with a sly smile. "However, such a tool will do one little good if one cannot properly strike the enemy. This course will be your most important subject of study. Every aspect of a knight begins with a strong base in proper technique. Someday, but sooner than you think, your life will depend on the lessons you learn here. Are there any questions before we begin?"

The gathered squires sat quietly with no questions forthcoming.

"Good," said Sir Syndil, "then, by all means, stand, find a suitable safe distance from one another and draw your weapons."

Danny found a spot near the edge of the circle. With a soft ring of steel, he drew his longsword and held it before him.

The room echoed with the sound of metal scraping against metal as swords slipped free from their sheaths. The collection of naked blades caught the light of the noonday sun as it trickled in through a series of vaulted windows.

"Every maneuver begins with a strong stance," said Sir Syndil, gliding between the squires, "and every stance is unique. Like a fingerprint, a stance depends on the weapon you wield, in combination with the physical structure of your body. The two main stances that you will learn under my instruction are

defensive and offensive. We will begin today by practicing an offensive stance." After a moment, he added, "So, if all of you will please assume an offensive stance, I will come around and correct you."

Unsure about what Sir Syndil was asking him to do, Danny did his best. Squaring his shoulders, he wrapped his hands around the hilt of his blade and positioned it in front of him at an angle.

Sir Syndil stalked through the room, inspecting and then adjusting the poses of the other squires. "Stand firm," he said to one. "Do not be afraid of the weight, hold the blade steady in your hands," he said to another. After working his way through the group, he came to stand before Danny. "Does that stance feel awkward?"

"...A little." However, Danny was quite sure that any position he found himself in would feel odd. It was his first time holding a blade in any particular kind of manner.

"Is the blade heavy in your hands?"

"Not really."

Sir Syndil nodded and smiled with an empathetic curve of the mouth. "A longsword is a fine weapon, Squire Firoth. Its strength rests in versatility. If needed, a longsword can be wielded with two hands for a more powerful stroke. In the same respect, it is light enough to hold with only one hand, leaving the other free to hold a shield or grab an opponent. If you would indulge me, please release your left hand and hold it out in front of you."

Without hesitation, Danny complied, finding the blade light enough to sustain with his right hand.

"Good, now, position the sword behind you and allow the weight to distribute throughout your entire arm instead of just one spot."

Taking a steadying breath, Danny positioned his sword behind him at the ready.

"Excellent," said Sir Syndil with a smile. "How does that feel?"

"Comfortable," said Danny, returning the smile.

"From your current position, you can begin any number of offensive maneuvers. It is a strong stance." With that, Sir Syndil moved off to the next squire, continuing his instruction.

By the end of the lesson, Danny noticed that Chris and Anthony required minimal correction. However, Matt and Doug, molded into their stances by Sir Syndil, needed the most attention. Alonso had a tendency to argue and would've needed less fine-tuning than he'd received if he had listened. Briza, on the other hand, was the star pupil, having no need of Sir Syndil's instruction, a fact that seemed to aggravate many of the other squires, except for Doug, who watched her with a dazed expression on his face.

"Very good," said Sir Syndil, after inspecting and correcting the last squire. "Now that all of you have a general understanding of an offensive stance, it is time to see what your skill level is," he continued, walking toward the far wall and selecting a finely-crafted longsword from the array of weaponry. Moving to the middle of the circle on the floor, he pulled the blade free from the scabbard and smiled. "Please, gather at the edge of the circle." After waiting for his instructions to be followed, he added, "I need a volunteer."

Briza stepped forward.

"Excellent, please, take your position in the opposite triangle." Turning to address the squires surrounding him, Sir Syndil said, "The circle before you is a dueling circle. You will come to know it well. Since this is the first day of your training and we have not been properly introduced, I shall learn who you are by participating in a mock duel with each one of you. Truly, dueling is the fastest way to learn about someone. Since this young squire has volunteered to go first, I would encourage you to watch and learn. Are there any questions before we begin?"

Doug slowly raised his hand into the air.

"Yes, Squire?" Sir Syndil questioned politely.

"What if you get hit? Aren't you afraid of getting hurt? Briza is excellent with a sword and I know for a fact that all of our blades are sharp," Doug added, with a quick glance in Briza's direction, an act that caused him to blush as she smiled back at him.

"Those are all good points, Squire. However, I ask that none of you hold back for fear of my safety. In order for me to understand your true current ability, you must engage me with all of your skill. I assure you all that I am quite capable of avoiding any injury."

A second hand arose from the group.

"Yes, you have a question?" Sir Syndil asked as his tone remained tempered.

"What if *we* get hurt?" another squire asked.

Sir Syndil produced a sly smile. "Rest assured, I shall only react defensively. Any damage you might sustain will be done by your own hand, not mine."

With that, the room remained quiet, suggesting that any other questions could wait.

"If there are no further questions, we shall begin," said Sir Syndil, his gaze turning back in Briza's direction. "Are you ready, Squire?"

Briza responded with a swift nod.

Sir Syndil twisted the blade upward in his hand, causing the naked brand to tap softly against his chest. "For the Light," he said, as he twirled the sword downward with a skilled grace.

Briza mimicked his movements with a parallel elegance and then adjusted her feet a shoulder-width apart. Ready her rapier at the hip, with the blade

pointing at an angle in front of her, she placed her opposite hand on the hilt to steady it.

"Good," said Sir Syndil, assuming his own stance by spreading his feet and lifting his longsword up in front of him, while allowing his opposite hand to drift behind him. "Begin," he said; the pitch of his voice was ever calm.

With a burst of movement, Briza bounded forward, her speed almost quicker than Danny's Human eye. Opening with a sidelong lunge, the point of her sword led the way.

Sir Syndil anticipated the attack, stepped to the side and swiped the assault aside as if he was but swatting a fly.

Unworried by the failure of her first attempt, Briza spun to the right with the grace of a dancer and looped her blade in a wicked arc.

Parrying the strike with ease, Sir Syndil took a small step forward as if to attack, but he did not.

Confused by the offensive maneuver, Briza answered with a series of quick cuts. Her slender blade hummed as it sliced through the air and found only the impenetrable circle of Sir Syndil's defense. Every time she assailed forward, her attempt was met with the same result, Sir Syndil deflected it and advanced, forcing Briza to retreat. The dance of blades progressed a minute more before Sir Syndil forced his opponent beyond the boundaries of the ring.

Looking rather winded, Briza slipped her blade back into the sheath and admitted defeat.

"Quite impressive," said Sir Syndil, his own breathing calm and collected. "You have had previous tutelage, yes?"

"My father," said Briza, "Sir Romaya Ingst Hollinger."

"Ah, yes, Sir Romaya is an excellent swordmaster. I can see his resemblance through your skill as well as his limitations."

"Limitations?" Briza asked, her tone becoming thick with emotion. "You insult my father?"

"Not at all, Squire Hollinger, I am simply stating a fact. If I may explain, your technique is near perfect. However, like your father before you, you allow your emotions to guide your hand. You are hot-tempered and easily goaded into attacks. There is no room in a battle for feelings. Your mind must be calm and focused. I am afraid this fact will be difficult for you to learn. Technique can be taught and corrected, but one's nature is a more personal journey."

Taking a deep breath, Briza nodded, exited the circle and dropped her head as if contemplating the Elf's words.

"Who will be next?" Sir Syndil asked, content to leave Briza to her own devices.

A series of hands rose into the air. However, Anthony beat them out.

"Please step forward, Squire, and take your position in the opposite triangle," invited Sir Syndil with a dramatic sweep of the arm.

Anthony hefted his greatsword upon his right shoulder and did just that. Once within the circle, he pulled the massive blade free and tossed the scabbard to the side.

With an agile gesture, Sir Syndil completed his salute and said, "For the Light."

Anthony attempted to respond in kind. However, lacking any sort of grace, the large blade proved much too cumbersome for him to fully imitate the movement. Then again, Anthony didn't look like the nimble type. Taking a side stance, he held the blade in front of him, both hands clutched around the heavy hilt.

With an ever-present smile upon his face, Sir Syndil assumed his defensive stance and said, "Whenever you are ready, Squire."

Anthony's forward foot scraped against the stone as he pointed his toes and leveled the point of his sword before him. Pushing off with his back foot, he surged ahead, thrusting his sword like a spear.

Sir Syndil spun to the right, easily avoiding the point as Anthony's blade found nothing but air.

Growling and grunting, Anthony's biceps bulged as he forced the greatsword into a wild, sidelong slash. The brand whistled as it cut through the air and found just that, as Sir Syndil ducked beneath and spun to meet his attacker. Red-faced, Anthony followed up with a series of powerful swings but found nothing but open space again and again. After a series of failed attacks, he stood, breathless, using the greatsword as nothing more than a crutch.

"Are you finished, Squire?" Sir Syndil cocked his head to the side.

"You are... too fast..." Anthony said in between great gulps of air.

"Or, perhaps you are too slow?" After taking a moment to allow the comment to sink in, Sir Syndil continued. "You have great strength, Squire. However, you rely on that strength much too readily. It is true that I have the advantage of speed when our weapons are concerned, yet you have me beat in reach. The greatsword is a powerful weapon when not wielded like a club. You have the will of a warrior but the technique of a child."

Anthony's face revealed his annoyance. However, proven right before his very eyes, he couldn't deny the facts. Defeated, he retrieved his sheath and exited the dueling circle.

"Next."

A series of hands lifted into the air. However, before Sir Syndil could call upon anyone, Chris took it upon himself to enter the circle.

"I'll go, Sir Syndil," he said in a composed manner.

"Very well," Sir Syndil said, indicating the opposite triangle.

With the soft song of metal sliding against metal, Chris freed the bastardsword from behind his back.

With a flow of movement, Sir Syndil finished his salute and said, "For the Light."

Chris mimicked the gesture as best he could, "For the Light."

"You may begin whenever you are ready," encouraged Sir Syndil.

Hefting the heavy sword before him, Chris paused as if to probe his opponent for a weakness, while Sir Syndil stared on with interest. Perhaps finding what he sought, Chris leveled the blade at his waist, took a surging step forward and arced an attack toward the base of Sir Syndil's legs. The biceps of his arms bulged with power, showing the strength of his swing as he attacked without restraint. Perhaps anticipating Sir Syndil's quick retreat, Chris allowed the weight of the blade to carry him full circle as he spun on his toes and unleashed another fierce attack. The bastardsword hissed as it cut through the air, leveled right at Sir Syndil's upper chest.

With a speed that awed everyone, Sir Syndil countered the move by ducking and angling his own blade upward, deflecting the larger sword skyward.

Knocked off-balance, Chris would've fallen if not for Sir Syndil's steady hand beneath his arm. "Good," Sir Syndil said with a widening smile. "I believe I have seen enough, Squire. Your technique is rudimentary, and you are quite headstrong. However, you have a natural talent that will serve you well. I see a bright future ahead of you."

"Thank you, Sir Syndil," Chris said after steadying himself.

"Please, rejoin the others."

Sheathing his sword, Chris did just that.

"Next."

Shoving his way past two other squires, Alonso stepped into the circle with his blade at the ready, the serrated edge of the longsword hovering threateningly in front of him.

"So be it," said Sir Syndil with a gracious quality, as he went through the motions of his salute. "For the Light."

As soon as he finished, Alonso bolted forward, his longsword leading the way in a sideways slash. Quick as lightning, Sir Syndil whipped his own sword in an upward arc, catching Alonso's blade just above the hilt with a clang. Alonso's grip fumbled as the vibration forced the sword from his hand and sent the blade tumbling end-over-end in the air. Alonso nearly tripped but he caught himself just in time. On his knees, he was about to stand back up when his own blade descended in front of him, sticking point first into the stone.

Gulping down some courage, he stood up, pulled his sword from the floor and said, "I thought you said you would only react defensively."

"And so I did, my young squire," said Sir Syndil. "However, you attacked me without waiting for my command to begin."

"Fine," said Alonso, returning to the opposite triangle. "Tell me when to begin."

"I am afraid I have already seen all that I need to, Squire."

"What? You tricked me."

"I did no such thing, Squire. You are hot-headed and your technique is close to non-existent. However, your true weakness is in your inability to discern the world around you from the reality you have conjured within your mind. You make excuses for your faults instead of acknowledging them. If you wish to master the blade, you must first master yourself."

"Whatever, I don't have to listen to this!" Alonso said, giving Sir Syndil his back.

"And yet again, you have just proven my point, Squire."

Alonso lingered mid-step, as if to ponder the Elf's words. However, he resumed his trudging step back into the circle of squires.

"I believe I have room for another within the dueling circle," said Sir Syndil.

A multitude of hands ascended into the air, including Danny, as he felt the need to try his luck.

Sir Syndil scanned the group with a smile. However, when he saw Danny's hand in the air, his expression seemed to widen as he singled Danny out. "Squire Firoth, if you would be so kind as to join me within the dueling circle."

Danny felt a sudden pang within his chest at the mention of his name. His breathing quickened, he felt his stomach drop. He was nervous.

"There is no need to be shy, Squire," encouraged Sir Syndil, indicating the opposite triangle in the circle. "Please."

Danny left the safety of the other squires and stepped into the dueling circle.

As soon as Danny stood within the opposing triangle, Sir Syndil whipped his sword to his chest and then twisted it downward in the familiar salute, "For the Light."

Danny pulled his longsword from the scabbard with a smooth movement, causing a soft ring as the blade slid free. Twisting the blade upward, he returned the salute in a rudimentary fashion and said, "For the Light."

"You may begin whenever you are ready, Squire."

Nodding, Danny leveled his body into an offensive stance, angling the sword behind him just as Sir Syndil had shown him. Pausing, he examined his opponent's stance, unsure of how to begin. Sir Syndil was a master of the blade as well as a Knight of the Light and if Danny were to stand any chance at all, he would need that strange power located somewhere within himself, it had only shown itself twice. Concentrating, he tried to will the ability into being,

however, the ghostly form that would predict Sir Syndil's movements failed to appear.

"Is everything alright, Squire?"

"Yes," Danny lied, as he realized that, up until this point, the power had only come to him while he was defending himself. However, in this case, he was the attacker.

Could my power be used in reverse? Danny thought, unsure of the answer. Deciding that the best way to find out was to try it, he pointed his forward foot and pushed off with his back foot. Dropping his blade low so that it scraped against the dark stone of the floor, he angled the attack upward and carved a direct line through the air, centered at Sir Syndil's chest. Just before the impact, *the familiar flicker of an image broke away from Sir Syndil's body and dodged to the right.* A split-second later, Sir Syndil followed.

There, thought Danny, pivoting on his left foot, spinning. Changing the momentum of his sword, he pulled it around his body and slashed at the phantom image, knowing that it indicated where Sir Syndil would end his movement. *I have him.*

Danny witnessed a clear expression of surprise on Sir Syndil's face. However, faster than Danny ever considered possible, the Elf broke through the image of himself and brought his own blade up to block. The two swords rang out as they collided, causing a jarring sensation to travel up Danny's sword arm and weaken his grip. Slipping from his fingers, the longsword twirled longways through the air before embedding itself into the stone of the circle. Danny stumbled backward and fell flat on his back.

"Intriguing," said Sir Syndil, taking two steps forward, offering Danny his left hand.

Taking advantage of the gesture, Danny stood up with Sir Syndil's help. "Thank you, Sir Syndil," said Danny, testing his right hand for injuries by opening and closing it. "You're incredibly fast."

"And you are incredibly unpredictable," said Sir Syndil with a sweeping smile.

"So, how did I do?"

"...Quite well, Squire Firoth. However, I feel that my critique of your ability is best suited for a more private setting. If you would, please, exit the circle and stay after class so that we may discuss it at length, yes?"

"Yes, Sir Syndil," said Danny, his tone relaying the uncertainty of the request.

However, whether Sir Syndil understood Danny's confusion or simply ignored it, he didn't acknowledge either one as he said, "Next."

"What was that all about, man?" Chris questioned in a whisper as Danny took a seated position beside him.

"I'm not exactly sure."

"You almost had him. I saw it. How'd you do that?"

"Maybe that's what he wants to talk to me about."

18

Mastering the Power Within

Dismissing the final squire from the dueling circle, Sir Syndil nodded with approval. "All of you have done well this first day. Many of you have shown great promise, others will have to work twice as hard. Do not be discouraged. With the proper guidance and dedication, any gap can be closed. Now, I must bid you all good day. Please, return to the barracks for lunch."

Not waiting for the Elf to change his mind, most of the squires moved toward the exit, exhausted from their first day of training, yet it was only halfway over.

"I'll meet up with you guys later," Danny said as Chris, Alonso, Matt, Doug and Anthony lingered at the doorway.

"You sure?" Matt asked, holding his right arm, an injury he'd received due to his inexperience with the blade.

Both Doug and Matt had entered the dueling circle as two of the last squires to volunteer. Matt had bruised his arm by overextending and losing his balance. It was no fault of Sir Syndil's. Both tested poorly. However, Sir Syndil had said that they showed promise, a common critique for most of the squires present.

"We'll save you a seat, man," said Chris.

Danny nodded and saw them off. Once the room was cleared, he turned to find Sir Syndil eyeing him.

"I am impressed, Squire Firoth." Danny was about to speak when Sir Syndil held up his hand, commanding silence. After a moment, he said, "The ability you told me about when we first met, you were able to use it in the dueling circle, were you not?"

"Yes."

"Then you have mastered it?"

"No."

"I see," said Sir Syndil, massaging the point of his chin. "And have you told anyone else about it?" he asked, after another few seconds of consideration.

"No, Sir Syndil. I felt that I should listen to what you said. I haven't told anyone."

"Yesterday, after the banquet with the king, defending against Squire Rigil, you used the ability then as well, yes?"

"Yes."

"Has it manifested during any other instance?"

"No."

"Have you attempted to call upon this power and not be able to use it?"

"Yes, I've tried before but it only seems to happen when I get into a fight."

"I see. So, currently, you are unable to use it outside of combative environments, yes?"

"I suppose so, or, rather, yes. I can only use it whenever I have to protect myself."

"However, this day, you used it while on the offensive. How did you manage that?"

"I'm not really sure yet," said Danny, dropping his gaze.

"Do not be ashamed, Danny," said Sir Syndil, placing a steadying hand on Danny's shoulder. "I believe I can help you."

"Really?" Danny asked, his voice jumping up an octave.

"Yes," said Sir Syndil, keeping his own voice calm and even.

"...How?"

"Before you can control this power of yours, you must first be able to control yourself. Tell me, what is the only part of your body that you have complete control of?"

After pondering the question for a short time, Danny said, "My mind?"

"A good answer, but no," said Sir Syndil with a sweeping smile. "The mind is a mysterious machine, partly within one's control, but also working independently of one's own consciousness. There is no way of freely controlling it completely. Try again."

Danny took a deep breath, unsure of the correct answer. After a second breath, it suddenly hit him, as he forced the air from his mouth. "My breathing," he said triumphantly.

"Indeed," said Sir Syndil, his smile widening. "With every breath you take, you sustain your life. With breathing comes the choice between life and death, as well as the key to control. Breathing comes naturally to us and is an automated response. However, if we wish, we are able to assume control at any time."

"What must I do?"

"Simple," said Sir Syndil, readjusting his body, removing his hand from Danny's shoulder. "First and foremost, you must close your eyes and relax. Allow your body to find comfort in any position. Let the tension drain from your limbs like the trickling of a waterfall."

Danny did as the tall Elf instructed and repositioned his feet beneath him. Sagging his shoulders, he realized how tense his body had been as the tightness in his muscles melted away.

"Good, now, breathe," instructed Sir Syndil, taking in a deep breath to model the behavior he wished Danny to mimic. "...Long deep breaths."

Danny allowed his chest to rise and fall in an elongated rhythm, forcing larger breaths in and out.

"No, Danny," said Sir Syndil. "Breathe in through your diaphragm, like this," he said, holding his right hand at the base of his abdomen for emphasis. "If you do it just right, you can feel it rise and fall."

Again, Danny mimicked his teacher, taking deeper breaths. He held his right hand at the base of his belly and felt the rhythmic pulse of life.

"Good," said Sir Syndil, "in and out. Concentrate on your breathing and take the time to feel the difference between this relaxed state and the tense feelings that beguile you. Excellent, just like that... breathe in and out."

Danny felt calm and focused. His mind felt free and the air tasted crisper and cleaner.

"How do you feel now, Danny?"

"This is amazing."

"Good, now open your eyes."

Danny began to slowly open his eyes, but quickly went wide-eyed as *the ghostly image of a longsword passed harmlessly through his head*. Anticipating the attack, Danny dodged to the right and drew his own blade with a ring of steel just as Sir Syndil's sword swished through the spot in which he'd just been standing.

Sir Syndil's phantom image took two steps to the rear and then vanished as the Elf followed in the predicted path.

"Are you insane!?" Danny yelled, holding his sword defensively in front of him.

"Insanity is a relative term, Squire Firoth; there are varying degrees of sanity."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Danny asked, his sword still leveled at Sir Syndil.

"Simply put, Squire Firoth, it means that since receiving the gift of sight, you have entered into a world that you do not fully understand." Dropping his arms, Sir Syndil allowed the tip of his blade to rest on the floor in a display of harmless intention. "If you had not received the gift of sight, what would you have done this summer?"

Danny shrugged, reluctant to let his guard down. "I don't know, sleep in and play video games, I guess."

"However, you did indeed receive the gift of sight and now you are training to be a Knight of the Light. Instead of choosing to battle digitized monsters on a screen, you have chosen to battle real ones with a blade. I assure you, there are no reset buttons or additional lives in real-life, Squire Firoth. The Shadows are immensely powerful creatures and if you want to survive, your training must match their brutality and hostility."

The sword grew heavy in Danny's hands as the tip sank downward. He wondered if he'd ignored the seriousness of his choice to become a Knight of the Light.

Sir Syndil took a slow step forward. "I tell you this not to discourage you, Danny, but to strengthen your resolve. You made your choice, now you must train to live up to it. At the end of this year, you will be given another choice, to continue your training or return to a life of normalcy. However, this choice is a lie, the gift of sight cannot be reversed. The Shadows will seek you out regardless."

Danny looked up, matching Sir Syndil's intense gaze. "How did you know I'd see your attack and dodge it?"

A wide smile replaced Sir Syndil's neutral expression, "I did not know."

"Then you could've killed me!"

"Abilities that are destined for battle must be forged in battle, Danny. If you are unable to master this part of yourself, death is certain in any case, by my hand or the Shadows, it matters not."

"You assume too much."

"Perhaps, but I base my assumptions on a combined experience that ranges in the hundreds of years." Sir Syndil's expression softened. "I would not ask you to do anything I thought you incapable of. Besides, if I truly wished your life, I could just as easily take it as stop myself," he said, just before bounding forward in a lunge. Quicker than Danny's Human eyes could follow, Sir Syndil's blade flickered through the air without even the faintest of sounds.

Unprepared for the attack, Danny watched helplessly as the tip of the Elf's sword stopped within inches of his nose. Shocked, Danny stood still as a statue.

Sir Syndil's smile widened slightly. "You see, Squire Firoth, if you had failed to dodge the attack, I could have stopped it at any time." Lowering his sword and taking a retreating step, he added, "Over a hundred years' worth of swordplay gives me a good deal of control."

"You could've just said that in the first place."

"True experience is the only way to learn. When you told your friends about your encounter with the Shadow at school, do you really believe they truly understood the desperation you felt or the gravity of the situation?"

"No," said Danny. Since discovering that he wasn't the only one with the gift of sight, Danny felt that almost everyone, except for Chris, treated the knowledge as well as the current training more like a vacation than anything else.

"And if they were to face a Shadow right now, do you think they would be as prepared as you would be, having already faced one?"

"No." Danny shook his head.

"Then do you understand why I could not simply tell you what to do? I had to allow you to learn it on your own."

"Yes, I understand, Sir Syndil." However, he felt the slightest hint of distrust for the Elf. Although his words made sense and seemed logical, there was something about Sir Syndil that bothered Danny.

"Tell me, Squire Firoth, what kind of man was your father?"

Danny hesitated, wondering why Sir Syndil would be asking about his father. "...My father?"

"A swordsman's potential can often be measured by the lineage he comes from."

"As I told you when we first met, my father was a soldier in the military. He died during combat, fighting for his country."

"Yes, Squire Firoth, I remember and I must once again apologize for opening old wounds. However, it is not his past that I am interested in, it is his spirit. Do you consider yourself much like him?"

Danny dropped his gaze and shrugged. He was only five when he had learned of his father's death, but he could still feel the pain of the loss. "I didn't really know him. I was very young when he passed. My mother always told me that Father intended to leave his ring to me. It was a silver band, engraved with an eagle and it's the only thing I remember about him. But... it was lost during his death."

"Do you remember any more details about the ring?"

Confused, Danny peered up and met Sir Syndil's steady gaze. "Why does that matter?"

"Never mind, Squire Firoth, I did not intend to upset you. I believe that is enough for this day," said Sir Syndil, as if sensing Danny's uneasiness. "I encourage you to practice what you have learned on your own." Sheathing his longsword, placing it back on the wall, he turned and added, "For the Light."

"For the Light, Sir Syndil," said Danny as he slipped his sword into the sheath.

He began the long walk back to the barracks, unsure about what had just happened between them.

19

A Test of Strategy

After lunch, Calador led the squires to a large structure overlooking the cresting waves of the northern part of the island. A short man was waiting just inside the building. He had thinning, brown hair, cut short; everyone could see that he brushed it over a small bald spot in the back of his head.

"Greetings, Sir James," said Calador as he entered.

With a slight twitch of the neck, Sir James adjusted his glasses, "Greetings, Calador. You have brought me the new batch of squires, I take it?"

"Indeed I have," said Calador, propping the door open, ushering the squires within.

"Ah, yes, please do come in and find a seat," as he pointed at a large number of short tables that made up the bulk of the large room.

Danny found a seat near the middle of the room. Chris followed and sat down in a chair at the same table, opposite Danny. With only two chairs per table, Matt claimed a seat opposite Doug and Alonso sat across from Anthony at another.

"Good, good," Sir James said with a series of quick nods.

"I will leave them in your hands, Sir James."

"Yes, of course, of course," Sir James said as Calador closed the door behind him.

Danny took the time to look at the table before him.

Made from sturdy wood, the table stood a little over a foot off the stone floor and measured four feet square, on both sides of the table stood a series of crafted miniatures. Molded in the likeness of knights, there was twenty to a set. Examining the small figurines, Danny marveled at the exquisite detail, they almost looked lifelike.

"Careful, Squire," Sir James said, suddenly behind Danny, "some of them don't like to be handled."

"Yes, sir," said Danny, placing the miniature back on the table. Confused by the cryptic statement, he gazed down at the figurine with a squint, almost expecting it to move.

"I am Sir James Wallen," began Sir James, this time addressing the class as a whole, "and I will be your instructor in the art of strategy." His head tilted to the side in a subtle tic. "This course will be one of the most important studies in your training. What you learn in this classroom will help you in the Great Dome once you earn your Bonded and join the ranks of an army. Within this room, you will all compete against each other in mock battles. You will learn to command armies of your own so that, perhaps later in your training, some of you will be able to attain the rank of lieutenant or possibly captain." After another sudden twitch of the head, Sir James continued, "Please take note that you are all sitting two to a table. The squire opposite you will be your opponent for this day."

Danny shot Chris a curious look; Chris returned the gesture with a shrug. Chris, well-known for his strategic mind on the wrestling mat, as well as his quick wit at Knights, would make a worthy adversary. Danny felt nervous, at the same time, he was excited to be facing his friend. However, before Danny could ponder the thought further, Sir James continued.

"The tables in front of you are imbued with the same magic as the Great Dome. For those of you that are not aware, the Great Dome can generate random terrain for every battle that takes place within. Therefore, no battle is ever the same. The miniatures in front of you will be your army. Once the battle begins, you will play the part of captain and tell your army where to go and what to do. Just like real Knights of the Light, every figure has certain strengths and weaknesses. It will be your job as captain to decide how to best use them on the battlefield. Are there any questions so far?"

Sir James waited for a hand that never rose. "Good," he said, with a quick tic of the head and a grunt to clear his throat. "The first round will be a practice round to get used to the controls." After another grunt, he produced a green

sphere about the size of a marble that glowed with a soft jade-colored light. Taking the stone in hand, he touched it to the table.

Danny's eyes widened as the surface of the table changed from its original color to a dark brown. The surface grew rough as it turned to soil, thin stalks of grass began to sprout. Next, miniature trees grew slowly, pebbles and boulders popped up like popcorn, populating the surface. Lastly, the middle of the table bulged upward, creating a steep hill.

Gasps of amazement filled the room as Sir James made his way to each table in turn, touching it with the shining stone. Each table formed into its own distinct environment. Some became mountainous; others had valleys, rivers and even ponds.

However, the magic was not finished, the miniature knights stirred to life and formed a straight line at the edge of the table. Unsheathing their tiny weapons with soft rings of the metal, they stood at the ready.

A soft glow drew Danny's eyes back to his own table, one of his knights stood encircled in a globe of light.

"You will notice that one of your knights is surrounded by a circle of light," explained Sir James, before Danny could question him. "This simply means that it's that particular knight's turn. The movement of the knight is limited to the area within the light. You may use basic commands, such as advance, retreat, attack or defend. However, the commands you give are limited only by your imagination. You can make them charge, climb, or even dance if you so choose." After a quick jerk of his head, Sir James added, "Go ahead and give it a try, Squires."

Danny surveyed the field of battle for a brief instant before leaning over and saying, "Move forward and take cover behind the boulder directly in front of you."

The small knight paced forward with even steps, reached the rock, and ducked beside it, pressing his shoulder against the hard surface. The globe of light vanished and transferred to the opposing side of the table, illuminating one of the figures that belonged to Chris.

"That was a very good command, Squire," said Sir James between two quick twitches of his head.

"Thank you, Sir James."

"How long will it keep dancing?" a familiar voice shouted out, Danny recognized Matt's voice.

The entire class turned and giggled, some even stood to get a better look as Matt's knight twirled and hopped in a graceful ballet.

"Until it is that particular knight's turn again," said Sir James with a smile.

Matt shrugged as his knight continued to dance.

"Leave it to Matt," was all Chris had to say on the subject.

"Now, the opposing squire should have a knight to move. Please do so whenever you are ready."

Chris nodded, took a slow and steady breath and said, "Charge forward and cut down anything in your way."

The figure instantly responded to Chris's command, sprinting ahead and cleaving into a small sapling that stood in its path. Cut at the base, the slender tree toppled over, allowing the knight to bolt forward and then stop as it met the edge of the lighted area.

"Good, Squires, very good," Sir James said, making his way around the room. "Now that you have a basic understanding of the controls, I leave the battle to you."

"This is going to be fun," said Danny, as the light disappeared from Chris's figure and enveloped one of his own.

The battle progressed as Danny commanded the full complement of his forces up the middle of the table, toward the high ground of the steep hill. Chris split his army in half, sending a cohort of ten around the side of the table in a flanking maneuver, while the rest worked their way to meet Danny's host on the hill. A hard-fought contest ensued as Danny's army repelled Chris' frontal assault. However, as Chris moved the other half of his army into position, Danny had no choice but to fight a two-front battle. Attacked on both sides, Danny's army dwindled to the last figure, not without causing heavy casualties of his own. Chris, left with two miniatures remaining, waited for what would most likely be Danny's last turn.

Taking a deep breath, Danny sighed as he searched for some way to win. The globe of light lingered around his one remaining figure, surrounded on both sides by Chris' two remaining knights.

"A well-fought battle," encouraged Sir James, looking the table over.

Taking his eyes off the unwinnable scene below him, Danny turned toward Sir James and said, "I've lost."

After a sudden, uncontrollable twitch of the head, Sir James adjusted his glasses and said, "In every battle, there must be a winner and a loser, Squire. However, this battle is not yet over. It seems to be your turn."

"It's a two to one no-win scenario," pointed out Danny.

"There are countless battles throughout history where two on one would have been a blessing, Squire. There are those that have faced even greater odds and won the day."

Taking another deep breath, Danny turned and surveyed his last miniature, which stood at the top of the hill. With an idea in mind, Danny leaned toward the table and gave the figure a command. "Use your entire momentum, charge forward and run the knight in front of you through with your longsword."

The instant the last word left Danny's lips, the knight leveled his longsword and bolted forward. Both knights met with a crash as Danny's knight forced the opposing miniature back and over the crest of the hill. Both figures tumbled down the steep slope and stopped at the base of the hill. Danny's knight stood up, victorious. The halo of light left Danny's knight and appeared around the single miniature at the top of the hill, which belonged to Chris.

"I don't have enough movement to get to you, that's not fair."

"An excellent display of strategy, Squire," Sir James said, placing a steady hand on Danny's shoulder.

Danny looked up and smiled.

"Use your sword for leverage and push the boulder on your right down the hill toward the last remaining knight," said Chris, leaning forward.

Danny turned and watched as Chris's figure went to work, loosening the large rock at the peak of the hill and pushing it over the edge. The lopsided boulder tumbled end-over-end down the hill, slamming into Danny's figure, crushing it into the ground.

"Nice," said Chris as he threw his hands up in victory; the globe of light lingered on the only remaining miniature standing at the crown of the hill.

"Well fought, Squire," said Sir James, moving to the opposite side of the table.

"Epic game, man," said Danny, admitting defeat with a smile.

"Game!" voiced Sir James. "What you have just taken part in is by no means just a game, Squires. Each miniature that was defeated represents a life. Thirty-nine souls perished this day on one table alone. Any battle, mock or real, should always be treated seriously."

"I meant no disrespect, Sir James."

Sir James took a deep breath to calm himself as his head twitched to the side. "None taken, Squire, it's just that I forget the innocence of youth now and again. What are your names?"

"Chris Greene."

"Danny Firoth."

"Squire Greene and Squire Firoth, I must say, both of you show great promise. It was wise of you to separate your forces and attack from both sides, Squire Greene. It was also good strategy to secure the high ground, Squire Firoth. Both of you have strategic minds for the battlefield; I anticipate your ascensions to lieutenant, and possibly even captain, during your coming years at the Academy."

"Thank you, Sir James," they both said in unison.

"Good battle, man," said Chris, extending his right hand across the table.

"It is also more respectful to refer to your fellow squires by their rank. After all, you are both Squires of the Light now," Sir James added, striking off to observe the other squires in combat.

"I will win next time, Squire Greene," said Danny with a smile.

Chris chuckled, returning the smile. "I look forward to the attempt, Squire Firoth."

Looking around, Danny noticed that Matt's dancing miniature had ceased to move. It was apparent that Doug had used his army to crush Matt's forces as five of Doug's remaining knights surrounded Matt's one, ready to deliver the final blow.

Turning toward the opposite table, Danny noticed that Anthony and Alonso looked evenly matched; only two knights remained on either side. Both commanded their knights forward into combat. However, Anthony won the day with one knight remaining.

"Well done, Squires," Sir James said as the last battle ended.

Danny watched, mesmerized, as the large hill on the table receded into the ground; the trees shriveled up, before disappearing and the soil reclaimed the rocks and boulders, swallowing them whole. The knights, finished with their duty, stood up, sheathed their weapons, and marched back to the side of the table, where they stood once again, motionless.

"This concludes your first day of training," said Sir James, after a slight twitch of the head.

20

A Well-Deserved Rest

The first week of training passed faster than Danny thought possible.

Each morning began with Sir Fredrick's increasingly lengthy run and rock chopping, followed, always, by techniques with Sir Syndil. Danny had grown accustomed to staying after class for some personal instruction, practicing the deep breathing and focusing techniques Sir Syndil was teaching him. After techniques and lunch, the days of instruction varied, the first day, of course, having been strategy with Sir James, a class that had become Danny's favorite. Tuesday was lengthy with a class on Shadow defense, taught by Sir Keargrow Pain, whose height, black eyes and grim voice gave Danny the creeps. Packed into the same day was a class on the history of the Light with Sir William Torjan, an old Knight of the Light with a soothing voice.

The following day, Danny attended a class with Sir Ranald Buttle, teaching Shadow lore, a subject that had begun to interest Danny more than any other. Thursday turned out to be rather boring, as Sir Rilix Grogan taught Grey lore, a class that seemed more like social studies, followed by Dark lore with Sir Filix Grogan. A class in defense against the magical arts, taught by Alamber

Halfelvin, took up the majority of Friday evening. Danny realized that the Half-Elf had a way of making even the most boring subject somewhat entertaining.

The final day of the week, Saturday, introduced them to the unarmed arts, taught by Lady Guinn Wellington, a course in which Chris seemed to be unparalleled. However, Chris seemed more focused on Lady Guinn than the course itself.

Sunday morning, Danny woke to the seventeenth chime of the eighteenth bell. He groaned as he sat up, his muscles were sore and aching. The first week of training was over, Danny welcomed the day of rest. However, now used to the routine of getting up, eating breakfast, and meeting Sir Fredrick for the morning run for the past six days, he had difficulty falling back asleep.

"I feel like I should get up and get ready," said Chris, verbalizing Danny's thoughts.

"Yeah, I can't go back to sleep either."

"Why am I awake?" Doug asked after the lingering hum of the eighteenth bell.

"I'm hungry," said Alonso, tossing the covers from his body and standing up.

"Me, too," said Anthony.

Swiveling his legs over the side of the bed, Danny turned to find Matt sound asleep. Yawning and stretching, he said, "Somebody, wake Matt up."

They decided to get some breakfast.

In addition to sore muscles, Danny was half-asleep as he descended the stairs to the common hall and sat down at the long table to eat breakfast. Chris and Doug found seats next to him.

Before Danny could take his first bite, Doug reached out and knocked over a tall glass of milk. "Careful," scolded Danny as he turned toward his friend. However, Doug didn't hear him as he stared straight ahead, across the common hall. Danny followed Doug's gaze, watching as Briza gracefully descended the last step that led up to the girls' barracks.

"Just go talk to her, man," said Chris.

Before Doug could respond, Briza's attention focused on all six boys, lingering there for a moment, before she turned and began walking toward Calador.

"I think she heard you, man," said Danny.

"Elves," was all Doug said as he watched her with dreamy eyes.

"You really should talk to her," said Danny.

"I don't know if I can."

"I really do think she likes you," imparted Chris.

"Really, you think so?" Doug asked, raising both eyebrows.

Briza turned toward them and smiled once again before turning back toward the much taller Elf and her current conversation with him.

"See, man," Chris emphasized.

"Okay, I'm going to go talk to her," said Doug confidently. Getting up from the table, he walked over to stand near Briza and Calador, both still locked in conversation.

"What do you think his chances are?" Matt asked, once Doug was out of earshot.

"Zero, I predict an epic fail," said Alonso with a snicker just before stuffing his mouth with a piece of jellied toast.

Anthony refused to comment as he piled his plate full for the second time.

Both Calador and Briza turned to receive Doug as though they'd been expecting him. Calador nodded, smiled and then took his leave, attending to other squires. Unable to hear what was being said, Danny suddenly wished he had the ears of an Elf as Doug and Briza began their conversation alone.

"He's doing better than I thought," said Alonso.

"I told you guys she liked him," said Chris.

"Quiet," ordered Danny. "He's coming back."

Briza smiled and disappeared, walking back up the stairs to the girls' barracks. Beaming, Doug made his way back to the long table, sat down and resumed eating.

Alonso dropped his forkful of eggs, awaiting details. Chris and Danny looked on curiously, also waiting for Doug to speak. Even Anthony stopped stuffing his mouth full of food in order to hear what Doug had to say.

"Well?" Matt asked finally.

Chewing a mouthful, then swallowing, Doug positioned his silverware upon his plate. Adjusting himself in his seat, he leaned forward and grunted, clearing his throat.

"Oh, come on!" commanded Matt.

"She has invited us to train with her."

"...Us?"

"Apparently, her conversation with Calador concerned reserving the northern section of the Great Dome for training, and she invited us to go with her."

"What about you?" Chris asked. "I thought the whole purpose of you going to talk with her was to discuss you and her."

"Well, I'm included in the 'us' part," said Doug, making a quotation mark motion with his fingers.

"I suppose it's a start," conceded Chris.

"...Training?" Matt asked, pushing his glasses farther up on his face. "Like that's going to happen. We just spent a whole week training and I'm not about to waste a day off."

"That's for sure," added Alonso.

"If I remember right, you could both do with more training. Your skills in technique class were pathetic," said Chris.

"As if you could make me," said Alonso.

"You know I could," said Chris.

"Fine," conceded Alonso before adding, "I was going to go anyway."

Defeated, Matt grimaced.

"I'm always up for training," mumbled Anthony, his mouth full of food.

"...You coming, Danny?" Chris asked.

Although Danny would have liked to have gone with them, he had a strong urge to find Sabrina. "No, I'm going to see if I can find Sabrina."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"I suppose I'll start by going to the Dragon Army barracks."

"Are you insane, man? After what happened at the King's Banquet?"

Finished, Danny got up from the table and shrugged in response.

"You want me to come with you?" Chris asked.

Danny shook his head. "I'll be fine. Besides, I think these four need your help way more than I do," he said, pointing out Anthony, Alonso, Matt, and Doug. "I'll catch up with you guys later."

"Be careful, man," Chris insisted.

"Aren't I always?"

"No," said Chris with a smile.

Danny returned the smile and struck out on his own. He made his way past the barracks of Horse Army and Griffin Army and stopped in front of the familiar flag of Dragon Army, two rather large squires stood guard with Bondeds at their side. Taking a deep breath, Danny took both steps in stride and stopped before them.

"What do you want, newb?" the larger squire to the left asked.

"I'm looking for someone, Squire Sabrina Drake."

"We don't associate with newbs," said the smaller guard on the right, his hand moving threateningly to the rounded hilt of his Bonded.

"Please, squire, she is a friend of mine."

"You'll get no answers from them, laddie," said a familiar voice from behind.

Danny's heart sank as turned to find Squire Rigil standing at the base of the steps.

"I, however, may be persuaded," continued the red-haired boy as he stepped up. "I told you this thing between us wasn't over," he added, adjusting a single piece of plate mail upon his bulky left shoulder, inscribed with the depiction of a dragon, marking him as a lieutenant.

"You know this, newb, Lieutenant Rigil?" one of the guards asked, indicating Danny.

"Aye, I know the lad." A small crowd began to pool behind him. Some wore the red robes of Dragon Army; others sported the varying colors of the other armies.

"Please, Squire Rigil, just tell me where Sabrina is and I'll be on my way."

"Why should I? And dat's lieutenant to da likes of you," said Rigil. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Do you play Knights, Lieutenant Rigil?"

"Aye, I do."

"I'll play you for Sabrina's location. If I win, you tell me where she is."

"Are ya challenging me to a duel, newb?"

"Sure, I guess so," said Danny. However, he'd never heard a game of Knights referred to as a duel.

A wide smile crossed Rigil's face as he turned to the small crowd and yelled, "A duel has been issued and the challenge has been accepted."

Whoops and cheers erupted from those gathering around as the mass of squires began to build, creating a rainbow of colored robes.

"Danny?" a familiar voice questioned from behind him.

Danny turned to find Rogen exiting the Dragon Army barracks, a look of pure confusion upon his face.

"What are you doing here?" the blond-haired squire asked.

"Dis here newb has challenged me to a duel," said Rigil in Danny's stead.

"I've challenged Rigil to a game of Knights to find out Sabrina's location," clarified Danny.

Rogen appeared dumbfounded. "A duel is not a mere game of cards, Squire Danny. If you have challenged Lieutenant Rigil to a duel, then it is swords you will cross, not cards."

"No," said Danny, shaking his head. "I challenged him to a game of cards," he tried to explain. However, turning back toward Rigil, he noticed a sweeping smile growing across the larger boy's face.

He'd been tricked.

"I didn't agree to a battle of blades."

"A challenge has been issued and accepted. It's the law," said Rigil, placing his hand on the blue, twisting hilt of a thick-bladed longsword.

"...The law?" Danny questioned.

"He doesn't know," pleaded Rogen, stepping forward, standing at Danny's side. "Besides, he doesn't even have a suit of dueling armor."

Rigil looked both boys up and down, nodding in agreement with some wicked plan. "Since ya seem to have taken a liking ta dis here newb, he can use your dueling armor."

"He is just a first-year squire," argued Rogen. "You cannot expect..."

"It is the law," said a voice from the back, interrupting Rogen.

Every squire, including Rigil, turned to find Sir Syndil standing just beyond the crowd. Silence ensued as the mass of squires parted, allowing the tall Elf to wade through to the middle.

"Professor Syndil, sir," said Rigil, with a nod and a smile, as the Elf stopped before him. However, Sir Syndil didn't return the gesture.

Instead, Sir Syndil turned to Danny and asked, "What are the terms?"

"I just wanted to know where Squire Sabrina Drake was," said Danny.

Sir Syndil nodded, turned to Rigil, and asked, "And you?"

"When I prevail, dis here first-year will have no furthra contact with Squire Drake," said Rigil with a smirk. "She's a member of Dragon Army and has no reason to associate with first-years."

"That's not fair!" Danny said, only to be silenced by the outstretched hand of Sir Syndil.

"At the chime of the seventh bell, the duel will commence within the southern chamber of the Great Dome," said Sir Syndil. "You have until that time to prepare. I suggest that you use your time wisely. However, if either one of you fail to appear, you will have violated the Law of the Light and be condemned to judgment."

"I need no preparation," said Rigil. "Why not begin now?"

"You dare to question me, Squire?"

Rigil dropped his brown eyes in submission. "I..." began Rigil hesitantly, only to be interrupted by Sir Syndil.

"Squire Firoth is a first-year squire, as such, he will be given time to prepare. Is that understood?"

"Aye, Professor Syndil, sir," said Rigil, his head still bowed. However, before stalking back into the Dragon Army barracks, he turned toward Danny and added, "I look forward ta seeing ya on the seventh hour, lad." With that said, he disappeared through the double doors of the barracks, followed by a group of his fellow red robes.

A series of whispers began to echo throughout the crowd of remaining squires. However, they were soon stanchd as Sir Syndil turned to address them. "It is a day of respite, Squires. Surely, there are other matters you must attend to?"

Quicker than they had gathered the host of squires dissipated, leaving Sir Syndil standing alone with Danny and Rogen.

"You never cease to amaze, do you, Squire Firoth?" swiveling on the balls of his feet.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Sir Syndil."

"Of course you don't," said Sir Syndil with a smile. "Come, let us retire to a place beyond prying ears," he added, looking at the guards who stood just

outside the Dragon Army barracks. "Come with us as well, Squire Rogen." He turned and walked off, clearly assuming that both boys would follow.

They did.

Stopping in an abandoned street, Sir Syndil turned and asked, "Do you know where Squire Drake is, Squire Rogen?"

"Yes, sir, I do," said Rogen, with a slight nod of the head. "And I would have told you if you had simply waited a few seconds longer!" he added, addressing Danny.

"If I could predict the future, then I would've waited," said Danny, growing angry at Rogen's insinuating tone.

Sir Syndil's right eyebrow lifted ever-so-slightly at Danny's comment. However, before Rogen could snap back, Sir Syndil held his right hand up, demanding silence. "There is no one to blame." Then, after looking at both boys carefully, he added, "Squire Rigil was right, you are both nearly of the same stature."

Rogen and Danny exchanged curious glances, before either squire could comment, Sir Syndil continued.

"Squire Rogen, you will take Danny to see Squire Drake and then gather your dueling armor. On the last chime of the ninth bell, I will look forward to seeing both of you in my classroom chambers."

"...Yes, Professor."

With that said, Sir Syndil walked off, with other urgent matters to attend.

"Come," urged Rogen, striking off. "I will take you to see Sabrina."

"...So much for a day of well-deserved rest," said Danny.

21

A Bonded Named Rose

Rogen led Danny to the southernmost part of the island, a series of steep stone stairs were carved into the cliff face. Peering down, Danny gasped in amazement. Below him, stretching out a good distance from the base of the rock, was a beach of ivory-colored sand. The glint of metal caught his eye as he spotted Sabrina, practicing her skill with a slender-edged blade, just beyond the reach of the lapping waves.

With an eagerness he hadn't felt for some time, Danny hopped down the stone steps with Rogen following behind. Taking the last two steps with a jump, Danny hit the snow-colored sand running. He slowed his step as he came upon Sabrina, not wanting to startle her.

However, if she had noticed his presence she didn't show it, as she continued her deadly dance with a grace unparalleled. Wearing the red robes of Dragon Army, the thin cloth caught the slender curves of her body; it failed to hinder her movement as it fluttered in the salty sea breeze blowing in from the open water.

Danny watched her movements with amazement, his eyes drawn to the slender rapier in her hand as the blade caught the sunlight and reflected the rays in a pinkish hue. The hilt ended in the form of a blossoming pink rose with two

petals, creating the hand guards. Twisting before him, Sabrina dipped low and brought the blade before her, causing it to hum as it cut through the air. With her eyes shut, she continued her ballet with the blade, seemingly unaware that someone watched her with a careful eye. Danny stepped forward with the intent to interrupt and stir her from her trance. However, he stopped as he felt a restraining hand on his right shoulder. Turning, he met Rogen's eyes as the blond-haired boy shook his head.

"Let her finish."

Danny took a step back, allowing Sabrina to continue.

Minutes passed as Sabrina fought off invisible enemies, whirling the pink rapier in an intricate pattern of combat. Then, with one final attack, she sheathed the blade into a matching scabbard at her side, and opened her eyes. Turning toward both boys, she smiled.

"You found me."

"Yeah," said Danny awkwardly, returning the smile. Dumbfounded, he added, "Rogen helped."

"I can see that," she said with a laugh. "I have something to show you," she added, pulling the rapier free from its scabbard and presenting it before her. "Her name is Rose."

"Her?" Danny asked, confused as Sabrina personified an inanimate object.

Sabrina smiled. "I assume Professor Torjan has yet to cover the subject of Bondeds?"

Danny nodded.

"Every single Bonded was once a Knight of the Light," began Sabrina in explanation, slipping her own back in the sheath. "When a Knight of the Light gets too old or is mortally wounded, they are given a choice, to pass with honor or be reborn in the enchanted steel of a blade so that they may still serve the Light."

"You mean your Bonded was once a living, breathing person?"

"She was a Knight of the Light," clarified Sabrina, "just as I shall be."

"And someone trapped her in that sword?"

"She volunteered for the greater good, to serve the Light."

"Can it... I mean she . . . talk to you?"

"From what I understand, the transition is difficult."

"I'd imagine it would be."

Placing her hand on the rose-hilted Bonded, Sabrina continued, "I can hear her thoughts vaguely. It is said that once a Bonded awakens to a wielder, its mind is but a pale shadow of the person it once was. As the link between Bonded and wielder grows, the Bonded matures in intelligence and power. However, all Bondeds develop relationships with their wielders differently."

"Will it... I mean . . . will she remember her past life, before she was trapped within the blade?"

Rogen stepped forward, pulling his own blade free from its sheath with the singing of steel. The blade, a soft gold, caught the amber rays of the overhead sun, reflecting brightly. The hilt, also plated in gold, crafted in the shape of the sun at the base, seemed to absorb the light and hold it, glowing ever so softly.

"Try not to think of it as a prison," he said. "A Knight of the Light gives oneself freely. It is considered the highest honor to become a Bonded."

"...And that's your Bonded?"

"His name is Radian," presenting the golden blade before him.

"There is no guarantee that a Bonded will remember its life before," continued Sabrina, answering the question Danny had asked before Rogen interrupted. "Some do, remembering small portions of their lives, others do not. It is the risk a Knight of the Light takes when the life is given."

"What exactly is given?"

"You are referring to the concept of the soul or the spirit?" Rogen asked.

"Yes, what if, by volunteering to become a Bonded, you give up your chance of an afterlife?"

"Assuming there is an afterlife," said Sabrina.

"Well, becoming a Bonded, by definition, is a form of life after death," added Rogen.

Danny shook his head. "But what if there's more?"

"That is a chance that one takes in order to preserve the ways of the Light," said Sabrina. "Whether it is one's soul or simply their consciousness, without the Bondeds, the Light would have fallen to the Dark centuries ago."

Danny tried to imagine what it would be like, trapped within a sword with only his thoughts to comfort him. He concluded that it would be a very lonely existence.

"Enough of this talk," said Sabrina, interrupting Danny's dark deliberations. "How is it that you ran into Rogen?"

Danny dropped his eyes, "About that..."

"What have you done now?" Sabrina asked, reading Danny's uncomfortable expression.

Danny refused to comment and looked at Rogen.

"Don't look at me."

"One of you better tell me what's going on!" Sabrina yelled, taking turns staring at both boys.

Rogen sheathed his bonded. "Danny has challenged Lieutenant Rigil to a duel," said Rogen, unwilling to meet Sabrina's frightful gaze.

"What?" Sabrina asked, locking her accusing soft brown eyes upon Danny.

"I challenged Rigil to a..." began Danny, only to be interrupted by Sabrina.

"I heard that!" she yelled. "Why would do such a thing!?"

"He tricked me," regaining his wits, raising his head to meet Sabrina's unwavering gaze, an action Danny quickly regretted. "I thought I might challenge him to a game of Knights in order to find you. I just wanted to see you."

"How foolish," said Sabrina, her voice but a whisper.

"What's done is done," interjected Rogen. "We don't have time to waste thinking about what should or should not have been done."

"When is it?" Sabrina asked, turning to face the crashing waves and toiling dark clouds beyond.

Danny followed her stare and found small comfort in the rhythmic sway of the sea. "At the seventh chime, I'm to meet Sir Syndil two hours before to prepare."

"I don't know if any amount of preparation will see you victorious before Squire Rigil," said Sabrina. "He is a third-year squire, a lieutenant at that, meaning that his Bonded has at least progressed to the first Awakening."

"...first Awakening?"

Sabrina allowed herself a heavy sigh as she sheathed her Bonded and turned toward Danny. "As I said before, as wielder and Bonded work together, a Bonded becomes more aware, as well as more powerful. Each Bonded contains its own innate powers, different from any other. There are three phases to mastering a Bonded, called Awakenings. The first Awakening grants the wielder the powers of the blade. One must master the first Awakening to become a lieutenant in any army. The second grants the powers of the blade to the wielder as both work as one in battle. One must reach the second Awakening in order to become a captain. The third Awakening summons the consciousness of the Bonded into our world to fight side by side with the wielder."

"I had no idea Bondeds were so powerful."

"That is why, as a first-year squire with a normal blade, you stand almost no chance against Rigil," Sabrina snapped.

"What's his Bonded's power?"

"I do not know."

22

Preparations before Battle

Danny and Sabrina walked Rogen to the top of the stairs that led down to the beach, the blond-haired boy promising to collect his dueling armor and meet them at Sir Syndil's classroom. Walking with Sabrina, Danny felt little stress about the upcoming duel, after all, this was how he'd pictured the day would progress in the first place. But there was a distance between them that Danny didn't want to acknowledge, an awkwardness that made him uncomfortable. They walked in silence until Sabrina finally broke the uneasiness.

"How could you be so stupid?" she asked, stopping their progress.

Danny stopped and turned to face her. "I was tricked," he pleaded. "I had no idea what I was doing or what would happen."

"That's just it, you had no business coming to the Dragon Army barracks."

"You told me to find you," argued Danny. "I wanted to see you."

"You are right. This is all my fault," Sabrina admitted, dropping her gaze.

"I didn't say that," consoled Danny, taking a step forward, standing within arm's reach. Danny wanted desperately to reach out to her, yet something kept him from doing just that.

Sabrina's brown eyes flashed up at him. "You did not have to say it. The facts speak for themselves. Come, you will need all the time you can get to prepare." With that, Sabrina bolted forward, her step quickened.

"Wait," said Danny, reaching out for her, slipping his right hand around her slender left wrist. She turned to scowl back at him as her eyes traveled down to where he held her. Despite the anger in her eyes, Danny maintained his grip.

"Why do you act so serious all the time? It's as if you're a completely different person when you're on this island."

"You would do well to release me," hissed Sabrina.

"I'm sorry," said Danny, doing as told, taking a step backward, placing his hands in the air to proclaim his innocence.

"My father is one of the greatest Knights of the Light ever to walk this Earth," Sabrina said, after a measured silence. "As his daughter, I am expected to act and progress in a certain way, and I have little time for the flights of emotion gifted to me by my Human side. I simply cannot be distracted, not now."

"Is that all I am to you, a mere distraction?"

Sabrina's voice grew soft. "The Light is fading, Danny. We are losing more Knights of the Light than we are gaining. The Dark grows more powerful daily, while the Light weakens."

"That isn't what I asked you."

"We don't have time for this, Danny. You must prepare."

"You make it sound like this will be a duel to the death."

"Fatalities have been known to occur, severe injuries are even more commonplace. If you are not fully prepared, you could face serious injury or worse."

"Great this day just gets better and better."

"Come, Sir Syndil and Rogen await us," urged Sabrina, reaching out, taking Danny's hand in her own. Pulling ever so gently, she compelled him forward.

Forced into moving, Danny set an equal pace as she dropped his hand. "You have not answered my question," said Danny after a moment of walking silently.

"And it shall remain unanswered until after this year of training is complete."

"...But why?" Danny asked, coming to a stop.

"Keep walking," commanded Sabrina, reaching out, grabbing the loose cloth of Danny's robes at the shoulder, guiding him forward. "Any answer I give you now will be a distraction," she continued, once they were back on course.

"I'm already distracted, I'm not even a week into training and I've already challenged a senior squire to a duel." Danny's heart fluttered as Sabrina gave him a slight smile. It vanished just as quickly as it had appeared.

"All the more reason for you to keep whatever focus remains," said Sabrina, turning down an alley.

Danny conceded, he knew that Sabrina was as stubborn as she was beautiful. Once she decided on a course of action, she would see it through to the end and Danny knew there was nothing he could do or say to sway her.

"We are here," she said, stopping before the familiar double doors of Sir Syndil's white brick building. "...Just in time, too," as the first chime of the ninth bell toned loud and clear. The other eight followed as Danny and Sabrina passed through the doorway and entered the dueling classroom.

"There you are," greeted Rogen. He stood just inside, holding a large black bag that jingled as he moved.

"Right on time," said Sir Syndil with a sweeping smile, standing to Rogen's right. "Come, we have little time to waste," he added, ushering Danny into the room. "Dump that here, Squire Rogen," he said, pointing to a spot on the floor next to Danny.

Rogen emptied the contents onto the floor. Danny watched curiously as a full-faced helm, breastplate, chainmail hauberk and leggings, pauldrens, gorget, gauntlets, a girth, and greaves tumbled free from the bag, banging and clanging against the marble floor. Individually, they formed a large, shining pile, together they created a full suit of plate mail.

"What's all that?" Danny asked.

"Your dueling armor," said Sir Syndil with a widening grin. "Normally, you would have to wait until your second year to receive a suit of dueling armor and be taught how to put it on. However, due to the circumstances and Squire Rogen's kindness, you are about to acquire it right away and learn how to don it quickly."

Reaching down, Danny picked up the breastplate, finding that it was lighter than he expected. "It's so light," verbalizing his thoughts.

"It is made from enchanted material," explained Sir Syndil. "It is designed to weigh a little less than your common clothing. Were it made of regular metal, it would weigh nearly ten times its current heft."

"Amazing," said Danny, continuing to judge the weight in his hand.

"Indeed," said Sir Syndil, his ever-present smile fixed upon his face. "Now, hold still while Squire Rogen and I fit you. You will need to relinquish your weapon."

Danny looked down at his longsword, and un-strapped the buckle.

"I will hold it for you." Sabrina took a quick step forward and offered her hands, palms up.

With the breastplate in one hand and his sword in the other, Danny held the blade out to her. "Thanks," he said as she took the sword in both hands.

Sabrina nodded and retreated, moving back to her original position.

"Does it go on like this?" Danny asked, fitting the breast plate over his chest.

"No," said Sir Syndil, reaching out and procuring the breastplate. "The suit must be layered. Your robes will serve as under-padding to protect your skin from the metal. The first piece you must don is the chain mail." After placing the breastplate back upon the pile, the Elf retrieved a shirt woven of small metal rings that jingled as he held it up before him. "Put this on," instructed Sir Syndil.

Danny followed the Elf's instruction. The chain fabric was cool to the touch. He slipped it over his head easily, as if it was a regular shirt made from common cloth.

"Now, the pants," said Sir Syndil, holding up a pair of trousers made from the same stitch of steel.

Pulling the chain pants over his robes, up his legs, Danny buckled the thick black belt around his waist. "I can barely feel the weight," he said, twisting and hopping, causing the armor to chink and chime.

"Hold still, Squire," commanded Sir Syndil. With a quick nod to Squire Rogen, both squire and knight went to work, buckling, strapping and attaching piece after piece of the plate armor.

Beginning with the breastplate, they fitted the forged metal to Danny's chest and added the gorget to protect the neck. Then, working up the arms, they buckled the vambraces around his wrists, slipped the gauntlets over his hands, and attached the pauldrons over his shoulders and biceps. Tending to the legs and groin area, they equipped greaves and girth, protecting the shins, knee, upper thigh and pelvis. Lastly, they slipped the full-faced helm over Danny's head. Padded within, the helm weighed little more than a baseball cap.

"Done," Sir Syndil said, both taking a step back to admire their work. "How does it feel?"

"Good," said Danny, testing his mobility by rotating his arms at the shoulders, finding only a slight hindrance to the movement.

"Even though the armor is not fitted to your body, it is perhaps the best match possible, given the time restraint," said Sir Syndil, stroking the point of his chin.

"It's so light," Danny said, hopping up and down.

"Such are the wonders of enchanted steel, Squire," replied Sir Syndil. "However, that is only one of its properties. In addition to protection, dueling armor is designed to simulate the wounds one might suffer in an actual battle."

"I don't understand."

"Allow me to demonstrate," said Sir Syndil, turning toward Sabrina. "I require Squire Firoth's blade, please," extending his right hand. Sabrina passed the longsword over and took a single step in retreat. "Thank you," said the Elf, turning back to Danny, freeing the naked blade with a soft ring of steel.

Holding the tip level to Danny's chest, Sir Syndil continued, "You see, Squire, the dueling armor will react to any enchanted metal that touches the surface."

Before Danny could question the statement, Sir Syndil tapped the tip of the blade on the base of the breastplate, causing the entire suit, from helmet to greaves, to stiffen like stone. Paralyzed within, Danny struggled to move, finding his body completely restrained. His confined movements, combined with his inability to control his balance, found him falling backward, thudding onto his back.

"What did you do to me," grumbled Danny through gritted teeth.

"As I said, Squire Firoth, the armor responds to any enchanted steel that touches the surface."

"Why can't I move?"

"Because you were struck in the chest, Squire," said the Elf with a smile. "In a real battle, a blow to the chest would cripple or kill most. Thus, a strike to the chest plate causes the armor to simulate death. Were we competing in a duel right now, you would have lost."

"That's great and all, but could you please get me out of this," said Danny, still struggling to move.

"But of course," said the Elf, retrieving a small glowing stone from his pocket. About the size of a marble, the pebble radiated a soft blue light. Leaning down, he touched it to the brow of Danny's helm.

Danny breathed a long sigh of relief as the armor returned to its normal state of mobility.

"Up you go," said Sir Syndil, slipping the glowing stone back into his pocket, offering his hand.

Danny reached up and allowed the Elf to pull him back to his feet. "What's that in your hand?"

"A release stone, it is given to professors, as well as ranking officers in the eight armies, for training purposes."

"Why didn't you tell me what would happen instead of freezing me like that?" Danny asked as his voice relayed annoyance.

"As we have already discussed, you cannot truly understand something unless you experience it for yourself, Squire Firoth," said Sir Syndil, ignoring Danny's aggravation. "The chest is only one of the targets that represent a kill," continued the Elf without skipping a beat. With a flick of the wrist, he angled the sword upward, leveling it at Danny's head and said, "The head." Then, lowering the point of the blade just below the breastplate, he added, "And the groin. All three of these areas represent a killing strike, contact with any one of them will cause the armor to become immobile, as you have already experienced. So if you hit your opponent in any one of these three locations, you will have won the duel."

"Sounds simple enough," said Danny, his mood lightning. "But what if I get hit in the arms or the legs?"

"I am glad you asked," his smile widening ever-so-slightly. Brushing the blade downward, he nicked the tip against the middle part of the greaves that protected Danny's right kneecap.

Danny's lower right leg, from the spot struck, down to his toes, became instantly stiff, causing him to stumble to the side as he fought for balance.

Then, with a quick twist of the wrist, Sir Syndil angled the sword upward, striking Danny's left arm at the elbow.

Again, the armor responded, Danny's left arm, from elbow to hand, went rigid. Unable to use the frozen appendage for balance, Danny thrashed wildly as he toppled over, landing on the marble floor once again. Using his right arm and left leg, he struggled to his feet.

"If struck in the arms or legs, the armor will immobilize you from the location hit, down your extremity."

"That's quite awkward," Danny relayed, bobbing from side to side in an attempt to remain standing.

"One would surmise that, in a real battle, losing an arm at the elbow and a leg at the knee would prove quite awkward."

The point wasn't lost on Danny as he tried to maintain his balance.

"As I said previously, the armor is designed to mimic possible wounds in a real battle."

"And Squire Rigil's armor will work the same?"

"Yes, strike him in the head, chest or groin and you win. Strike him in the arms or the legs and you turn the duel to your advantage. However, there is still the factor of Squire Rigil's Bonded," said Sir Syndil, reaching into his pocket and pulling out the release stone. Taking a single step forward, he touched it to the pauldren protecting Danny's left shoulder.

Instantly, Danny regained the use of his right leg and left arm.

"I'm aware that Squire Rigil has mastered the first Awakening," he said, flexing his left hand.

"I assume that you have Squire Drake to thank for that," sheathing Danny's sword and offering the blade, hilt first.

Glad to have the sword back in his hands, Danny strapped it around his waist. "What I don't know is what power Squire Rigil's Bonded holds."

"The name of his Bonded is Whiril. It is a most effective weapon, it can create and control the wind," explained Sir Syndil, stroking the point of his chin.

"The wind?" probed Danny, hoping for more information. Even Rogen and Sabrina perked up when they heard that; if they wished to progress within the ranks of Dragon Army, Rigil was one of the four lieutenants they would have to best in a duel.

"Yes, not only can the wielder of Whiril create strong air currents, they can also control them. It is this very power that has helped Squire Rigil assume the rank of lieutenant. You see, wind is nearly invisible to the eye."

"How do you fight such a thing?" Rogen asked.

Sir Syndil turned to address Rogen's question. "Unless you can see the wind for yourself, one would be at a significant disadvantage."

"Has a first-year squire ever defeated a senior squire who could wield the powers of an awakened Bonded?" Danny asked.

Turning back toward Danny, Sir Syndil produced a grin. "No, should you defeat Squire Rigil, you will be the first."

23

A Duel of Squires

Helmet in hand, Danny gasped as he entered the side chamber of the Great Dome with Sabrina at his side, a large crowd of multicolored robes awaited within.

"Word gets around fast," observed Rogen, coming to stand behind him, placing a reassuring hand upon Danny's back.

Danny welcomed the gesture as the gathered squires, including a few Knights of the Light, began whispering among themselves. However, he felt much better when he spotted Chris, Alonso, Matt, Anthony, Briza and Doug emerge from the crowd, making their way toward him.

"Are you crazy, man?" Chris asked, coming to stand before Danny. "They say the one you're gonna duel is a third-year squire and a lieutenant, at that."

"Fourth-year squire, if you count the current year," corrected Matt, holding up four fingers for emphasis.

"It wasn't by choice," said Danny, glaring at Matt. "He tricked me."

"What're you going to do?" Doug asked.

"Attempt to win," said Danny, with a confidence he didn't feel.

"You will be fighting at a significant disadvantage," said Briza. "The odds of you landing a single blow are quite low. It is actually more likely that you will be physically injured or possibly killed."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"I merely speak the truth, Squire Firoth," said Briza frankly.

"Sorry, she's had very little interaction with Humans," Doug explained. "Elves prefer to be straight-forward, they don't account for feelings."

"I meant no offense," offered Briza.

"Your friend speaks the truth," said Sir Syndil. "It takes a bit of practice to tiptoe around the truth with Humans, they do not always want to hear it. Speaking of which, I believe we should get to it," added the Elf, as the first of seven chimes announced the beginning of the hour. Without another word, he breezed past Danny and silenced the crowd with two outstretched arms.

Danny felt two strong arms turn him in Sabrina's direction. With quick and practiced hands, Sabrina double-checked the straps of his armor. Once finished, she stood straight up, met Danny's gaze and smiled.

"You will do fine," she said, but she lacked confidence, her tone betrayed her.

"I would've thought descendants of the Dragonic would more likely speak like an Elf," said Danny, returning the smile.

"Quite the opposite," said Sabrina. "Dragonics are more prone to talk in riddles, they often conceal their true intentions, as well as their feelings."

"Good to know," said Danny, as the final chime of seven lingered in the air.

"It is time!" yelled Sir Syndil from somewhere within the crowd. "I would ask that both combatants please make their way to me."

Shouldering a deep breath, Danny faked a smile in Sabrina's direction and turned toward the awaiting crowd.

"Good luck, man," said Chris.

"Pwn him," encouraged Matt.

"You can do it," said Doug, giving Briza a look, trying, with his eyes, to persuade her to keep her thoughts to herself.

Anthony nodded and gave Danny a heavy pat on the back while Alonso shook his head as if to impart his doubt.

Breaking away from his friends, Danny felt the heavy burden of all eyes upon him. Making his way through gathered spectators, he heard whispers containing his name and noticed looks of skepticism. It seemed as though no one believed he could do it, a fact that was beginning to wear him down, turning his stomach inside-out with tension. Emerging from the crowd, seeing Sir Syndil's smiling face, provided Danny with a small comfort. However, his respite disappeared as he spotted Squire Rigil, standing on the opposite side of the clearing.

Danny had thought that the squire was large before, but he looked massive now, wearing the full complement of his dueling armor. Danny guessed that the armor added almost half a foot to the larger squire's stature. However, as intimidating as Squire Rigil looked, it was the figure standing next to him that drew Danny's attention, Squire Vyce Ven Lasko, Captain of Dragon Army.

Although he was shorter than his lieutenant, Captain Vyce had an aura about him that demanded attention. His deep blue eyes seemed to peer right through Danny.

"Make an example of him, Lieutenant Rigil," the captain said candidly, his gaze unwavering as he met Danny's stare. With that said, he pivoted, paced to the edge of the crowd and did an about-face.

"I did na think you'd show, lad."

Danny leveled his gaze toward his opponent. "I'm surprised that you did," said Danny, with a confidence he did not feel.

Rigil simply smiled and rested his hand on the spiraling hilt of his Bonded.

"Are you both ready to begin?" Sir Syndil asked, appearing between them.

"I request a change to the terms of this duel," said Danny, stepping forward.

"You can't change..." began Rigil in protest, only to be silenced by Sir Syndil's slender arm.

"State your reasoning."

"The initial terms of this duel have already come to pass," explained Danny. "I no longer need Squire Rigil's assistance to locate Squire Drake. Therefore, this duel has already been settled."

"Cowardly newb!" said Rigil. "Ya think ta squirm your way out of this?"

"I only wish to change the terms," said Danny, hoping that his voice didn't betray the butterflies fluttering within his gut.

"The terms?" Sir Syndil asked.

"Should I be the victor, I only ask that I be allowed to visit Squire Drake openly on the seventh day of every week, our day of rest."

"Are these terms satisfactory?" Sir Syndil inquired, turning toward Squire Rigil.

The larger boy's face tightened with anger as he looked to Captain Vyce for permission. "Agreed," said Rigil, after receiving an acknowledging nod from his captain. "It's not like ya going to win anyhow, newb."

"Then the terms are agreed upon and the duel will commence," announced Sir Syndil. "All that is required is the proper environment," he added, reaching into his pocket, producing a glowing green orb about the size of a marble, similar to the bauble Sir James had used to transform the surface of the table during his instruction of strategy.

Danny watched in awe as Sir Syndil bent a knee and touched the stone to the sand. Instantly, the white sand shifted as a small quake lurched beneath

Danny's feet. Cracks formed into proper angles as the sand solidified into bricks of white stone, forming a large circle that dipped low into the ground. Danny nearly lost his balance, the stone beneath him stopped suddenly as the final details etched themselves into the surface, creating the familiar symbols of a dueling circle, four times the size of the one in Sir Syndil's classroom.

Looking around, Danny's jaw dropped further, the chamber had transformed into a proper arena, complete with stair-step seating. When the rumbling of the ground ceased, he found himself at the bottom of a large circular pit, surrounded by a wall of stone at least six feet in height with the crowd suspended above. Peering across the dueling circle, he noticed that Squire Rigil seemed unimpressed, obviously he was familiar with such an overwhelming display of magic.

"Prepare yourselves!" Sir Syndil said, stepping between them, securing the jade orb back within his pocket.

Squire Rigil went to work instantly, securing his helm upon his head.

Danny did the same.

"A strike to the head, chest, abdomen or pelvis is an automatic win," instructed Sir Syndil. "A strike to the extremity is a crippling blow, but it does not assure victory. Should one of you suffer loss of consciousness or death, victory will go to the squire still standing. Are there any questions?"

Both boys shook their head, indicating that they understood the rules.

"Then take your positions," Sir Syndil commanded, pointing at the two triangles carved on opposite ends of the dueling circle.

Danny walked to his designated triangle, his breathing picking up as the sound of each breath echoed within the confines of his helm. He could feel the palms of his hands begin to sweat beneath the armor plating that protected them as his stomach began to twist into a knot. He was extremely nervous. Stepping onto the triangle, he felt the full weight of all eyes upon him.

"Make ready!"

Squire Rigil drew his Bonded without hesitation, revealing a thick, light blue blade, a little longer than a longsword, broad from base to tip. Eager to begin, he settled into an offensive stance and leveled his broadsword behind, readying to strike.

Taking a steadying breath, Danny freed his own sword with a ring of steel that seemed to echo throughout the arena. Angling his blade behind him, he entered into a defensive stance. The weight of the sword felt good in his hand, providing him with a small comfort.

"Salute," said Sir Syndil.

"For the Light," responded Squire Rigil, twisting his wide blade in an elegant pattern of honor before returning to his threatening pose.

"For the Light," said Danny, going through the practiced motion.

Sir Syndil took a single step forward and held his right hand high, ready to signal the beginning of the bout.

Danny closed his eyes, cleared his mind and filled his lungs, going through the breathing exercises Sir Syndil had taught him. As he concentrated on the rhythmic pattern of his breathing, his anxiety dissipated.

"Begin!" shouted Sir Syndil.

Danny opened his eyes to find that *the ghostly form of Squire Rigil had already charged forward, closing the distance quicker than Danny thought possible, opening with an overhead chop.* The real Rigil followed moments behind.

Anticipating the attack, Danny twisted to the left as his opponent's broadsword whistled through the air, striking the stone floor with a loud crack, causing the white stone to split from the force of Rigil's attack.

Too easy, thought Danny, seeing the chance of Rigil's open back, angling his sword for a counter-attack. Committing to the motion, Danny watched with joy as Rigil's *ghost recovered and moved to block the blow.* Danny knew the larger boy wouldn't be able to execute the defensive tactic in time.

However, Rigil did just that, almost surpassing his specter. The two blades met with a loud clang as Rigil parried the attack to the side, sending a jarring motion down Danny's blade and up his arm.

Knocked off-balance, Danny twisted to the right *as Rigil's image raised his sword for the final blow.* Expecting the attack, Danny raised his own blade to block.

Fulfilling the prediction of his spirit, Rigil put both hands to the task and hacked downward, the blue blade almost humming as it flashed through the air.

Already off-balance, Danny had little choice but to take the brunt of the blow as the full strength of Squire Rigil descended upon him. With a concussive sound of metal meeting metal, the two swords collided, forcing Danny to his knee. Danny's arm wavered as Rigil forced his attack, his brand inched toward the front of Danny's helm. In an attempt to stave off defeat, Danny reached up with his opposite hand and wrapped his fingers around the tip of his opponent's sword. He felt his armored gauntlet stiffen, freezing his hand in place. Forcing Rigil's blade upward, freeing his own, Danny slashed outward, connecting with his opponent's left greave just below the ankle.

Rigil grunted as a kick from his opposite foot connected squarely with the front of Danny's helm. The arena spun temporarily before Danny rolled back to his feet to find Squire Rigil retreating to the opposite end of the dueling circle. It brought Danny some small pride knowing that the larger squire now moved with a slight limp. Investigating his left hand, he found it stiff as stone and curled into a fist.

"Ya move well, newb. I'll give ya that," said Rigil from a distance. "You're a lot quicker than I would've expected. I underestimated ya."

"I could say the same for you."

"My Bonded is much lighter than most, weighing a little less than a feather. I win most of my duels because I'm underestimated."

"That would've been nice to know beforehand," said Danny, shooting Sir Syndil a glare.

The tall Elf shrugged, smiling in response.

"Ya seemed to handle it well enough," said Rigil. "Almost as if ya could read my movements or predict them," he added, his tone rising questioningly.

"Stop playing with him, finish it," yelled a deep-toned voice, thick with a British accent.

Although Danny already knew who'd spoken, he followed the sound to the speaker anyway, finding Squire Vyce Ven Lasko, Captain of Dragon Army, gazing down upon him with startling blue eyes, his face resolute.

Movement flashed in Danny's peripheral vision, causing him to return his attention to his opponent. *With a single smooth motion, Squire Rigil's ghost raised its broadsword upward to strike. Danny repositioned into a defensive stance as Rigil followed in the phantom's predicted pattern of movement. Clear on the opposite side of the dueling circle, Danny could only guess at his opponent's intention as the ghost of Squire Rigil stepped forward and swept its shadowy sword downward, mouthing some unintelligible words, the sound muffled as if he was speaking under water. Dark swirls emerged around the brand, creating a tunnel of churning air aimed directly at Danny.*

Before Danny could study the attack further, the real Rigil mimicked the movement, adding, "Gust, Whiril."

Unlike the phantom's attack, the windy vortex that Danny knew was coming showed no signs of its presence, except for the stirring of dust and debris as it whirled across the stone floor in its designated path.

Diving to the right, Danny felt the pull of the current as it whooshed past him. The turbulent attack struck the wall directly behind the spot where he'd been standing only moments before, causing the stone to split and crack from the impact. Rolling to his feet, Danny glanced behind him, noting a small crater in the stone wall. He quickly concluded that being on the receiving end of such an attack would mean instant defeat.

"How could ya have possibly dodged that?" Squire Rigil asked, the tip of his blade sagging in surprise.

Danny didn't honor Rigil with a response. Instead, he turned his attention inward, thinking quickly, he knew that he would have to engage his opponent in close combat if he wanted to win. Apparently Rigil's Bonded was more dangerous at a distance. Rigil's retreat to the opposite end of the dueling circle had hinted as much. Now, seeing the power of Rigil's Bonded firsthand, Danny was sure of it.

"It makes no difference," said Squire Rigil when confronted with Danny's silence. "Ya won't dodge this next attack," he added, angling his blade behind him for a second assault.

Swayed from his inner reflections, Danny pushed his mind back to the task as *Squire Rigil's ghost weaved its sword in an intricate pattern of attacks, creating three individual wind tunnels. One of the black whirlwinds traveled in a straight line, right down the center of the dueling circle, while the other two arced to the left and the right, following the curve of the circle and converging on the exact spot where Danny now stood.* He realized instantly that he would be unable to avoid this attack in the same manner as the last. Panic gripped Danny as Squire Rigil began his deadly wind dance, yelling, "Bluster, Whiril."

The dust stirred in the flurry of the wind; chunks of stone ripped free from the floor and the wall, tumbling end over end within the belly of the raging vortex.

Danny charged in two quick, bounding steps as the forward airstream bore down upon him. However, just before the coiling wind tunnel could overtake him, he leapt to the right at an angle. All but his left foot made it free as the powerful current of air propelled him upward like a rag doll. The wall of stone behind him exploded under the weight of the wind attack, causing large chunks of rock to cascade into the air and plummet to the ground in rhythmic thuds.

Danny landed heavily on his right side; he rolled to his feet and charged forward. Dazed, lungs filled with fire, he forced himself onward, charging to within striking distance of Squire Rigil.

Surprised by Danny's charge and the smaller boy's ability to avoid his best attack, Squire Rigil took two quick steps in retreat, causing his back to brush against the wall.

Unwilling to give his rival a chance to use his Bonded, Danny pressed his attack, opening up with an underhand swing. The tip of his longsword scraped the stone floor beneath him, causing the metal to ring out in anticipation of the strike.

Backed into a corner, Rigil barely got his Bonded up in time as the two blades clanged off one another.

However, Danny was far from finished; he forced the offensive, following up with a barrage of blade work.

Forced into the defensive, Rigil parried every attack. However, with his left foot frozen, every movement seemed to put him off-balance.

Finally, angling for an overhead attack, Danny watched as *the specter of Squire Rigil moved to intercept.* Anticipating the parry, Danny switched momentum in mid-swing, driving the blade lower than his opponent would be able to block, or so he thought.

Quicker than Danny could follow, Rigil knocked the blade aside with his Bonded, turning an attack that would have resulted in a strike to his stomach into a blow to his lower-right thigh. Squire Rigil stumbled backward and slumped against the wall behind him, his right leg frozen from his mid-thigh down, joined by his already-stiffened left foot.

Intent on finishing the duel, Danny stepped into striking distance and prepared for the final blow. Attempting the same trick twice, Danny leveled a strike to Rigil's sternum. With the help of Rigil's silhouette, Danny anticipated the counter, forcing his blade higher in an attack aimed for his opponent's helm.

Rigil's experience saved him, somehow he predicted the familiar pattern of the attack, knocking Danny's longsword clear of its intent, causing the blade to clang off the stone behind them. Reversing Whiril with a twist of the wrist, Rigil swiped desperately for the exposed armor of Danny's legs.

The attack found nothing but air; Danny had glimpsed the counter before it occurred, he retreated in a quick hop, putting himself just out of Rigil's reach.

Danny knew that his ability to predict Rigil's movements was the only reason he hadn't lost yet. Rigil's speed and skill were far superior to Danny's meager week of training with the blade, a fact that he knew must be weighing heavily upon the other squire's mind. Even with his foresight, Danny wasn't sure if he could win.

"Yield," Danny said, hoping the larger boy would take his bluff.

A low, rumbling laugh echoed from within Squire Rigil's helm as he hefted his bulk back to his feet. "Ya think me beaten, newb?"

"I do," with more bravado than he felt.

"Ya thought ta fight me close, assuming I couldn't use Whiril's ability, yes?" Rigil asked, his tone betraying the presence of a smile beneath the helm.

"My sword must touch your armor to win. I couldn't do that from the opposite side of the circle," said Danny, unwilling to give away his strategy even though Rigil had guessed it.

Squire Rigil responded with another hearty laugh, muffled by the confines of his helmet. "'Tis a good answer, newb, I'll give ya that. But I've one trick left."

Danny's right hand gripped the hilt of his sword tighter as *the ghost of Rigil broke free of his body and swept its broad blade in a semi-circle, creating a whirling mass of dark tendrils. Unlike the previous wind attacks, shaped like small tornados, the air gusted wide and engulfed the entire dueling circle.*

Danny knew that if he couldn't dodge it, he would have to stop it. Spurred forward, hoping to end the contest now, he swung wide in an attempt to catch the side of Rigil's helm.

"Tempest," yelled Squire Rigil as he followed through.

The tip of Danny's sword passed within inches of Squire Rigil's brow, forced just out of range as the first waves of wind gusted past him. Danny felt his

body take flight, tumbling end over end, as the hilt of his sword slipped from his fingers. He came to a jarring halt as his back impacted against the stone of the wall with a loud thud, while his sword embedded itself halfway to the hilt in the rock beside him. Forced flat against the wall, the frenzied wind pummeled him, creating tiny cracks in the stone where his body was pinned.

Just as quickly as it had begun, the wind dwindled to a comfortable breeze, releasing Danny from its hold. Danny dropped to his knees and slumped forward, heaving the weight of his body upon his right hand. With his lungs on fire and his head pounding, he glanced up to find Squire Rigil hobbling toward him, two of them to be exact.

Danny realized that the blow to his head had disorientated him. He had lost his concentration and, along with it, the ability to predict his opponent's movements. He was at a severe disadvantage. On top of that, his body felt bruised from head to toe. Even the smallest of movements caused spine-tingling pain to course through his extremities.

"I'm amazed ya managed to stay conscious," Squire Rigil said, stopping within striking distance.

Danny had no choice but to agree as he shook his head and blinked twice, managing to force the two images of his foe into one. Rigil stood over him with the tip of his Bonded lingering threateningly close to Danny's eyes.

"I'll admit that ya fought well, for a newb. However, it's over," raising Whiril for the final attack.

Danny raised his head slightly, the small movement sent stiffening pain down his back. Looking up, just over Rigil's right shoulder, he found Sabrina's bold brown eyes, her face a mask of worry. *Sabrina*, he thought, her presence and her name filled his body with strength.

"No!" Danny shouted, as Rigil's sword arm reached its peak.

"What was that, newb?" Rigil asked as his Bonded paused, hovering just above him.

"It's not over," said Danny through gritted teeth, tightening his fingers into a fist.

"Aye, it is over," said Rigil softly, before unleashing a downward swing.

Although he couldn't predict the attack at that moment, its intent was obvious enough. Danny leaned back, raised his left arm and moved to swipe the attack aside. The move resulted in a bone-numbing clang as Whiril struck the gauntlet covering Danny's forearm, freezing it in place. However, in the same instant, Danny reached behind him with his right hand and felt the familiar grip of the dragon-hilted dagger he'd secreted at his back. Just as Tyramear had told him to do, Danny had refused to leave the dagger behind. Pulling the dagger free, Danny angled his attack, aiming for the lower part of

Rigil's breastplate. The slender blade glowed with a faint light as Danny scraped it across the polished mail, screeching, cutting a shallow abrasion in the armor.

Looking up, Danny found Whiril hanging just over his head, frozen in place. Apparently, Rigil had managed to recover fast enough to follow up with a secondary attack. Danny found his opponent's eyes, wide, fixed upon him. Silent moments, which felt like an eternity, followed. Both boys remained motionless. Although Danny couldn't see his foe's face, Rigil's eyes betrayed his surprise as he toppled backward, his armor clanging against the stone floor.

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Danny struggled to his feet and secured the dagger behind him. All around him, the crowd remained silent, in utter shock, stunned by this unheard-of outcome. Reaching up, he heaved the hilt of his embedded blade from the hold of the stone, the act took its toll, taking all of his remaining strength.

"Did he win?" Alonso asked, his familiar voice carrying through the awkward silence.

His friend's question brought Danny some comfort as he allowed himself a painful chuckle. He found that it hurt to laugh as he grunted happily. Slipping the sword back into its sheath, Danny turned to find Sir Syndil standing before him, the Elf's approach undetectable.

"You did better than I expected, Squire Firoth," said the Elf, touching a glowing blue orb to Danny's left arm.

Instantly, movement returned to his left hand. Danny flexed his forearm and fingers.

"I give you, Squire Danny Firoth, your victor!" announced Sir Syndil loudly.

"...Alright!" Chris yelled as a choir of other voices joined his in a crescendo of cheers.

Danny's heart soared as the gathered squires hailed him and stomped the stone beneath their feet, creating a rhythmic thud that vibrated through the entire arena.

"This is your right, as victor," said Sir Syndil, presenting his right hand. Within it, he held a small blue orb that radiated a soft blue light.

Confused, Danny stared at the small sphere.

Acknowledging his misunderstanding, Sir Syndil motioned toward Squire Rigil as he lay frozen.

Nodding with understanding, Danny retrieved the bauble from the Elf's hand and took two steps forward. Bending down, he touched the stone to Rigil's armor at the right shoulder. The larger boy stirred to movement as Danny offered his left hand.

Rigil hesitated before taking Danny's arm at the wrist.

Grunting, Danny helped Rigil to his feet, finding his body physically drained, almost unable to meet the challenge. Once the larger squire was up, Danny retracted his hand and retreated, unsure of the other's mood.

Rigil held Whiril in front of him, the blade splitting the eye slits of his helm. Danny almost expected him to attack. Instead, Rigil whipped the light-blue brand in a quick salute just before sheathing it home. Then, removing his helm, he revealed a welcoming smile.

"Ya sure are full of surprises, newb," his smile widening ever-so-slightly.

"So are you," said Danny, relieved that he didn't have to fight the larger boy a second time as he removed his own helm.

"Aye, but it would na mean the same," said Rigil. "Your fight'n style is unique. If I did na know better, I would've thought ya could a known what I was gonna do before I did it."

"If only that was possible," said Danny, faking a smile, offering the blue orb back to Sir Syndil.

The Elf simply nodded in response and placed the glowing stone back in his pocket. Then, pulling out another, he bent down and touched the small green orb to the stone, causing the dueling circle to rise and the surrounding arena to descend as the ground shifted beneath Danny's feet. The stone deteriorated before his eyes, changing back into grains of white sand.

"Ya fought well, newb," said Squire Rigil once the transformation of the chamber was complete. "Although ya are forbidden to enter the Dragon Army barracks, ask for me at the entrance, and I shall greet ya as friend."

"Does this mean you'll stop calling me a newb?"

"I'm afraid not, newb," said Rigil, smiling as he moved past Danny to join the waiting red robes of Dragon Army.

Watching Rigil go, Danny caught a glimpse of Squire Lasko, he met the captain's eyes for the briefest of moments, his gaze stoic, yet respectful. However, the contact didn't last long as the crowd surged and encircled Danny, many offering their congratulations, others showing obvious surprise at his victory.

Strong arms gripped him from behind, spinning him around.

"How'd you do that?" Anthony asked, his face showed his surprise.

"Epic pwnage, man," said Matt.

Danny found Chris, Alonso, Matt, Doug, Briza, Sabrina and Rogen standing behind the larger squire holding him, all awaiting an answer.

"I... I don't know," said Danny, looking for Sir Syndil, the Elf was nowhere to be found. "Luck, I guess."

"There was no luck in that battle," said Briza in a forceful manner. "Your movements were purposeful, as if you knew when and where every attack was coming from."

"Are you accusing me of something?"

"We only want the truth," Sabrina said in Briza's stead.

Danny found himself wondering if Sir Syndil had been right about others reacting badly once they found out about his ability. He decided to err on the side of caution; he really didn't want Sabrina to think poorly of him. "It was pure luck that I had the dagger Sir Tyramear had given me," said Danny, holding the dragon-hilted blade up for everyone to see. "Remind me to thank your father again," he added, faking a smile.

Everyone, except for Sabrina and Briza, seemed to accept the explanation as they gathered around him and praised his victory. Danny didn't like lying to Sabrina. However, it was better than the alternative, Sabrina despising him for his ability.

24

A Night with Calador

Two months passed quicker than Danny could've imagined, so caught up was he in the structured schedule of daily training. After winning the duel against Squire Rigil, he found that others treated him quite differently; even venerable squires from other armies showed him respect. No longer greeted as only a first-year, he was treated like a member of the eight armies, Danny felt accepted; Squire Rigil still called him a 'newb'. However, Danny came to accept the nickname, a small price to pay for the larger squire's friendship. Just as promised, Squire Rigil never failed to greet Danny as a friend during his visits to the Dragon Army barracks every Sunday since their dual. On a couple of occasions, the one-time foe even offered to train with Danny and Sabrina.

In the weeks since the now legendary duel, Danny spent almost every day, training with Sir Syndil, honing his ability. Danny's concentration improved, allowing him to perceive the actions of others for longer periods of time. His goal, the goal Sir Syndil had given him, was to try to extend the duration of his ability to a full day. Currently, he could only sustain the foresight for about a couple of hours prior to one's actions.

However, he wasn't the only one who'd progressed, Chris had become a force of nature with his hand and a half-sword, besting most of the first-year

class, save for Briza and Danny himself. In most cases, Danny found that duels with Chris often resulted in a draw, so flawless was his technique.

Anthony maintained his brawn-over-brain method, which often resulted in his victory against those less gifted. However, at times, his sheer strength even overcame those who showed superior skill.

Alonso, often quick, still hot-tempered, turned out to be an exceptional duelist. His speed, combined with his unpredictability, often turned the tide against many of his opponents. Then again, these same attributes sometimes turned the tide against him as well.

Doug improved with the help of Briza's coaching. Matt continued to struggle with the basics, but showed small advancement nonetheless.

The current day found Danny back at the tailor for refitting, greeted by the head tailor, Mathis Deandrow, who looked every part the nobleman in his elegant light blue robes.

"Greetings, Squires," said the slender man as he dipped low in a graceful bow, addressing Danny and the entire first-year class. "It has been two months since I saw you all last," he continued, wading into the crowd, "and I can see that many of you are already in serious need of alterations." He made his point clear as he stopped before Doug, pinched two fingers worth of fabric from his shoulders, and pulled the cloth taut, showing a significant amount of extra material. "Your training has a way of loosening clothes. Come, I shall see you all properly refitted."

An army of tailors assailed Danny, armed with quill and ink, parchment and a measuring tape. When they were finished, he found out that he'd lost two inches around the waist and gained three inches of muscle in the thighs, two inches around the biceps, four inches in his chest and three inches from shoulder to shoulder.

Matt and Doug had lost a substantial amount of weight and replaced it with lean muscle, their oversized robes drooped from the excess fabric.

Chris and Alonso had stayed relatively the same; they'd both been in good shape when they began their training. However, Anthony seemed to be getting bigger and bigger, his body stacked on pound after pound of muscle, his robes were starting to rip at the seams.

By the time Danny and the others returned to the barracks, the soft glow of the sun began to descend behind the whirling dark clouds of the surrounding storm, sending the last beams of amber light over the eye above. Upon entering, Danny found the table set with a feast of foodstuffs, the aroma was both welcoming and beckoning. After eating his fill with his friends, Danny had every intention of finding his way back to his bunk, tomorrow would be another day of hard training and he would need the proper rest. However, he only made it as far as the stairs.

"Squire Firoth," Calador beckoned.

Danny turned to face the blind Elf. *I wonder what he wants?*

"I was wondering, might I have a word?"

Danny looked to Chris, who shrugged in bewilderment. "Of course," said Danny, returning the shrug before making his way over to Calador as he stood at the head of the long dining table.

"Teacher's pet," Alonso whispered behind Danny's back.

"Let us take a walk, far away from prying ears," said Calador, turning toward the double doors.

Stepping into the cool night air, complete with a brisk breeze, Calador turned right at a slow, purposeful pace.

Danny fell into step beside the Elf, his interest rising. He decided to keep to himself until Calador explained the reason for this one-on-one attention. Thus far, Calador had remained aloof, overseeing the needs of the first-year squires from a silent distance. However, Calador seemed to carry an air of kindness about him. He wasn't known for saying much, yet his words were often well-received and to the point. Danny found this new behavior somewhat alarming.

"You have been spending a substantial amount of time under the tutelage of Sir Syndil."

"Yes," offered Danny, hesitating, unsure if the Elf's words were a statement or a question.

"May I inquire why?"

"Sir Syndil has been assisting me with my swordsmanship."

"Was it his tutelage that helped you to defeat Squire Rigil in a duel?"

"You know about that?"

A small smile cracked the stern lips of Calador, an expression not often seen on the Elf. Stopping, he turned to stare down at Danny. Although the Elf sported his usual binding of a white blindfold, Danny could feel the intensity of Calador's focus. "Most of the island has heard of your victory, Squire Firoth. You must remember that my ears are more keen than most."

"Of course," said Danny, stopping before the Elf, meeting his blunted stare squarely. Calador's gaze seemed to go right through him. Feeling uncomfortable, Danny dropped his head.

"Come," said Calador, resuming his walk, his attention forward as if sensing Danny's distress.

Again, Danny followed behind, rushing to catch up, falling into step.

"So, it was Sir Syndil's extra training that allowed you to accomplish something that no other squire has been able to do since the inception of the Order of the Light?" Calador asked after a few silent seconds of walking.

"I... I believe so, yes."

"You do not wish to tell me the whole truth?" Calador asked in a tempered tone.

Caught off-guard, Danny slowed his step, falling behind the Elf. He had indeed kept the whole of the truth from the Elf, but Danny wondered how Calador could've known.

"I can hear the subtle differences in your voice as you tense up in a lie," explained Calador, slowing his pace to match Danny's. "If you were a better liar, I might not have caught it."

"You can tell when people are lying just by the tone of their voice?"

"I see, so you *were* lying?"

Danny stopped. "You tricked me!"

Calador took two last steps before turning, a smirk growing across his face. "Did I?"

"So, *can* you tell if someone is lying or not?"

"It seems we both have our own little secrets, Squire Firoth."

"Why'd you bring me out here?"

Calador's expression resumed to his familiar mask of emotionless composure. "I simply wish to tell you a story, Squire," said the Elf, his blindfolded stare sending chills down Danny's spine.

"I'm listening," said Danny, not knowing what to expect.

"Then come with me, this is not the proper setting," said Calador, turning as two Knights of the Light passed on a routine patrol, their heavy armor clanging as they walked.

Danny followed, his curiosity piqued.

Turning down a slim corridor, between two white brick buildings, Calador emerged onto a dual-lane road that ran along the edge of the island. Before him stretched a highly arched bridge that provided passage across a deep break in the earth. The bridge was bricked with the usual white stone of the island and ornate in its construction, with four towering pillars.

Following behind but at a distance, Danny watched as Calador stopped near the edge of the cliff face. The pointed ears of the Elf perked up, as if listening for possible intruders, just before he turned and dropped over the side. Danny's heart stopped in his chest as he ran to the edge, expecting to see the Elf's lifeless body strewn across a set of jagged rocks below. "Calador!" he yelled, before peering over the edge. Instead of the gruesome sight he expected, Danny found the Elf standing safely on a large stone outcropping, the rhythmic sound of the crashing waves echoing from nearly fifty feet below him.

"Come, Squire," said Calador with a smile, just before hopping to a lower set of protruding stones.

Danny's knees became rubbery as he glanced down at the sheer cliff wall and the razor-sharp rocks that appeared and then disappeared in the colliding waves of the sea.

"This is crazy," said Danny, more for his own benefit than the Elf's ears. However, Danny carried no false hope that the Elf had failed to hear him.

"I found this path during my first year here as a squire," said Calador, hopping to a third set of stones further down the cliff face. "You could say I was quite cocky in my youth."

"You were a squire?"

"Once," said Calador, a faint hint of regret in his tone. "But that is no secret."

Danny pondered the comment only momentarily.

"Come! There is something I wish you to see." Danny hesitated a bit longer, prompting the Elf to add, "Do not be so reserved, Squire, you have eyes to see where you are jumping; I have only my memory."

"I'd rather have your memories than my sight, I think," Danny conceded. "Not only can I see where to jump, I can also see where I'll end up if I fall."

"Then close your eyes if you wish," said Calador with a soft chuckle.

Despite the task before him, Danny found the Elf's light-hearted mood comforting. This was a side of Calador that he had never seen before. Taking a deep breath, steadying his resolve, Danny made the four-foot drop, landing solidly on the stone below. To his relief, the rock was firm under his feet. However, the cadenced crash of the ocean beneath him was a constant reminder of the risk.

"Good," encouraged Calador, "now follow me."

Slowly, but surely, Danny followed the Elf down a descending set of naturally-occurring steps, some were an easy jump and others required a jog just shy of a running start. Together, they worked their way beneath the bridge to a wet rock landing, the lapping waves cresting just below the lip.

"Here, you will need this." Calador presented Danny with a short stick wrapped in a soft grey cloth.

Un-wrapping the package, Danny nearly dropped it into the water as the tip burst into a bright yellow flame. However, after running his left hand through it, he realized that the blaze didn't burn, nor did it produce any heat. Upon closer inspection, the wood appeared to be black, as if charred.

"The flame is eternal, but it will not keep you warm at night, nor will it assist in the creation of a real fire. Its purpose is to provide light only. Obviously, I have no use for it, so you may keep it if you wish."

"Thank you," said Danny, continuing to test the licking flames on the palm of his left hand.

"This way," said Calador, ducking beneath an overhanging ledge, entering the threshold of a jagged cave.

Danny followed, leaving the sound of the crashing waves behind him, muffled by the corridors of the cave. Delving deeper, the rocky path descended in a series of steep steps before expanding into a spacious chamber with a vaulted ceiling, filled with hanging stalactites. The heatless flame bathed the massive room in soft yellow light. Danny found Calador in the middle of the room, the Elf's hands folded behind him and his face an emotionless wall. Around the Elf, upon the smoothed stone of the floor, ran a crudely carved ring inscribed with ancient text. Danny recognized it as a dueling circle.

"What is this place?"

"This is where I prefer to train, Squire Firoth," said Calador with a matter-of-fact tone.

"I don't understand. You said you were a squire once, right?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't you a Knight of the Light?"

"You were chosen to become a squire due to the Gift of Sight, yes?"

"Yes."

"Well, I have no sight at all. That gift was taken from me."

"...How?"

"It happened during my third year as a squire. Another squire, one year my senior, accidentally extinguished my sight forever during a duel over rank, or so he said. He was the captain of Dragon Army at the time; I was his lieutenant. I thought myself to be better and challenged him to a duel in order to assure my place as captain. I lost my eyesight as a result. As I said previously, I was quite the cocky squire." Calador allowed himself a slight chuckle.

"But you're still able to see so much despite the loss," said Danny in a comforting tone. He felt unsure of Calador's intentions, the Elf had never been this forthcoming with him. "Surely, losing your sight wouldn't have stopped you from pursuing knighthood."

"No, it would not have," said the Elf as he dropped his gaze, his tone thick with pent-up emotion. Forcing the sorrow down, resuming his cold façade, he added, "I lost something far more precious than my sight that day. My Bonded was shattered, destroyed during the same attack that took my eyes. It was the last thing I ever saw."

"Couldn't you just choose another?"

Calador's hardened disguise broke momentarily. "If only it was as easy as that."

"Isn't it?"

"No," said Calador, his gaze turning in Danny's direction. "A Knight of the Light does not simply choose a Bonded on his or her own. The Bonded must

choose the wielder as well. Once the relationship between a Knight of the Light and a Bonded is made, it is carried until death. The name given to the blade, Bonded, is not in name only, the wielder and blade become one. Thus, losing a Bonded is like losing a part of yourself, once lost, neither is able to choose another."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," said Danny in a tone filled with sincere empathy.

"You are a first-year squire and not Lightborn; there is no way you could have known at this point," said Calador coldly.

"I just meant..."

"Your pity is well received, Squire Firoth, but unnecessary," interrupted Calador. "I made peace with my lot many years ago."

"Why are you telling me this?" Danny asked, feeling rather annoyed by the Elf's interruption.

"Because, Danny," said Calador, his voice refilled with purpose, "the squire who took my eyes is now a Knight of the Light as well as an instructor at this school."

"Who is it?"

"His name is Sir Syndil Sartak Tribolari."

Danny found the fact doubtful, Sir Syndil had shown him nothing but kindness and his tutelage had been invaluable.

"Your doubt is understandable, Squire Firoth," said Calador, as if he could read Danny's mind and his emotions.

"I don't understand. You said it was an accident."

"I said he *claimed* it was an accident."

"But what does this have to do with me?"

"I am afraid this has everything to do with you, Danny."

Danny remained unconvinced.

"If there is one thing that I have learned over the years regarding Sir Syndil, it is that he never does anything without purpose. There was purpose when he took my sight, as well as my Bonded, in time, I believe I would have surpassed him. It is my belief that he anticipated my rise and used that opportunity to destroy my eventual rivalry."

"Sir Syndil wouldn't..."

"Do you think it was merely happenstance that Sir Syndil journeyed to your home and administered your testing to become a Knight of the Light?" Calador asked, once again interrupting. When Danny failed to answer, the Elf continued. "Sir Syndil has remained on this island for well over one hundred years, studying the Eye of Darkness and researching the Shadows, as well as many other subjects of interest. He has never once set foot off the island. That is, not until recently, in order to test you with the Trials. You do not find that

just a little coincidental, any one knight could have undertaken such a simple task, and one usually does, but not him."

Danny was confused. He knew Calador was telling the truth about Sir Syndil's tendency to stay on White Rock, Sir Mick had said just that during their short meeting. However, Danny refused to see Sir Syndil in such a negative light.

"I feel your confusion, Danny, and it is most understandable, I do not quite understand it myself. However, for whatever reason, Sir Syndil has taken an interest in you and because he has, so must I."

"I... I don't know why," said Danny, in a lie.

"That is the second time you have lied to me, Squire Firoth," taking a step forward. "Your emotions betray your voice once again."

"I'm not lying," Danny said in a firmer tone.

"Keep your secrets on the tip of your tongue if you wish, Squire Firoth, but know that the blade never lies," said Calador, reaching behind him, unlatching his scabbard. Once free, the fan of blades unfolded behind him like the feathers of a peacock.

"What're you doing?"

"I am challenging you to a duel, Squire Firoth," said the Elf with a calm clarity.

Danny was surprised and frightened by the Elf's statement as he turned and looked around to plan his escape. He noted the entrance to the cavern, as well as a few other passages that might serve as a way out. However, the light of the torch flickered for a brief moment as he felt a slight breeze upon the hand that held it.

Turning back to face the Elf, he noticed that the end of the torch now littered the cavern floor just behind Calador, aglow with a soft, sallow light. Looking down, Danny took note of the charcoal stick still in his hand, the top cleanly cut above his fingers.

"Now you have no choice. By now, the sun has settled well beyond the coming night. Without light, your chances of making the climb back up are rather slim and even less so if you plan to navigate the corridors of these caverns."

Looking up, Danny realized that Calador now held a shortsword in his right hand and a longsword in his left, the two bottom slots of the fan-like scabbard empty as both blades drooped at his side in an unthreatening manner. The Elf's swords sported an intricate pattern upon the hilt, different in design, but familiar in appearance, as if they were both pieces of a larger puzzle. What truly alarmed Danny was that the Elf appeared to be standing in the same space he had occupied previously, meaning that he'd drawn his weapons, moved,

attacked, and then moved back without the subtlest of noises at the speed of but a glance.

"You're insane!" Danny accused.

"No, I am thorough," rebutted Calador.

Danny considered his options. The Elf's logic was sound, he couldn't ascend the same path he'd come down. Without light, the slippery rocks would make for a fatal climb. Danny counted three other passageways, all three were dark and unpromising. Besides, it was likely that Calador would be able to navigate them much faster; Danny knew that he couldn't outrun him. He would have to fight. Re-positioning his feet, Danny slipped his right hand around the hilt of his sword and pulled the blade free with a slight ring of steel. The sound echoed throughout the cavern, causing Calador's ears to perk up.

"I see, so you have accepted my challenge?"

"You've given me no choice," said Danny, assuming a defensive stance. Clearing his mind, filling his lungs with salty sea air, he pooled his concentration just the way Sir Syndil had shown him. Concentrating on the position of his opponent, he noted *the familiar faint outline* around Calador's slender body. If the Elf decided to attack, Danny would know about it well before it happened.

"Sir Syndil has taught you the techniques of concentration," said Calador, more of a statement than a question. "This is most curious."

Danny switched to an offensive stance. The time for talking was over.

"You plan to attack?" the Elf asked, as both of his blades snapped into defensive positions.

Danny refused to respond as he charged forward, his blade leading the way with a sidelong swing. With two bounding leaps, he closed the distance between them. Predicting the Elf's attempt at a parry, Danny switched the slant of his blade, angling the attack lower. However, even with Danny's ghostly sight, Calador countered the strike with his opposite blade and spun to the right with the elegance of a dancer, his speed well beyond the realm of mortal capability.

Still caught in his charge and off-balance, Danny stumbled a few more feet forward before turning back to face the Elf.

"You would do better to fight more defensively," said Calador, facing away from Danny, presenting his back as if in mockery.

Danny approached more cautiously this time, leveling his longsword to the right in preparation. Choosing his footing carefully, he stalked the Elf with a quiet step, hoping to use Calador's handicap against him. Now within striking distance, he flicked his wrists outward, putting the power of his forearms into a quick swipe. Steel rang against steel as Danny's attack found nothing but the shiny edge of Calador's shortsword, held protectively across the Elf's back.

Danny stood, stunned, Calador had blocked the blow with one simple movement, without even having to turn around.

However, what frustrated Danny the most was that the Elf's speed was faster than he could predict.

"You thought to use my blindness against me, yes?" Calador asked, more of a statement than a question.

Finding the Elf's haughty rhetoric increasingly annoying, Danny scraped his blade free from his opponent and reversed the momentum in a slash intended for Calador's lower right leg.

With a simple move, the Elf lifted his leg, causing the Danny to strike nothing but open air.

Twisting the blade in his hand, Danny followed up with a series of swift attacks, angling his blade up, down, and to the side, depending upon the predicted pattern of Calador's movements. However, the Elf's defense seemed impenetrable as Calador met Danny blow for blow, the rhythmic sound of metal meeting metal echoed through the thick rock walls of the cavern.

Ending the assault with an upward attack, also blocked by Calador, Danny retreated in a quick hop to the rear, impressed by the blind Elf's ability.

"Finished?" Calador asked, standing still, as if the recent exchange of blades had been but a mere game between children.

Danny's breath caught within his breast. He'd attacked the Elf from every conceivable angle, attempted to bypass his defense by predicting the pattern of his parries, and yet he remained nearly exhausted, while Calador stood before him as calm and refreshed as the moment they started.

"Your technique is impressive for a first-year," said the Elf, after Danny refused to answer. "However, there is something in your swordsmanship that I cannot place. It is an odd tendency to anticipate your opponent's placement of a parry and then change the angle of your attack. Such a style is quite rare, I can only think of one other who used such a method."

"Who was that?" Danny dropped his guard, thinking the duel over.

"My conclusion is not yet complete; I require more data. Thus, I shall keep my answer to myself until I am sure. This duel is only half over, Squire Firoth."

Danny's blade shot back up *as Calador's outline bounded forward in a wicked attack*, the Elf following seconds behind.

Leading in with the longsword, Calador twisted and turned in a flurry of strikes, his speed blinding, and his movements flawless.

Forced backward, Danny worked to the edge of his capability as he struggled to block every blow. His ability to predict the Elf's movements was the only thing that saved him. However, even knowing where Calador would attack next did little to match the pure speed of his opponent, the ethereal image of Calador moved just as fast.

Faking a frontal assault with his shortsword, Calador pulled the attack, spun upon his heel and leveled a swipe at Danny's back.

Foreseeing the bluff, Danny ignored the faint from the front and angled the sword behind his back, mimicking Calador's haughty maneuver only moments before. Both blades met with a loud clang that reverberated through the expanse of the cavern. Danny stood motionless, waiting for another attack; one that he was sure would come. However, both Elf and *image* stood just as still.

"Impossible," said Calador, stepping back, sheathing both of his swords. "It is simply not possible."

Performing an about-face, Danny leveled his sword before him, unsure of the Elf's intentions. However, he relaxed as he noticed Calador's unthreatening composure, his blades sheathed, arms at his side, head angled toward the floor in thought.

"What's not possible?" Danny asked, confused.

Calador's ears twitched and his head came up almost as if he'd forgotten about Danny's presence.

"You," he said, as if truly noticing Danny for the first time and leveling his sightless stare upon him.

"Me?" Danny asked, lifting his sword back into place just in case.

"You have the Ghostsight, do you not?"

"...Ghostsight?" Danny questioned once again, his curiosity outweighing his caution as his sword drooped down.

"During our initial exchange, you possessed an uncanny ability to know when and where I would attempt to block you. Such skill is rare and impressive but not beyond the boundaries of ordinary ability. However, such is the mark of a true master. A first-year squire would not possess such a skill, most likely. The full truth revealed itself during my offensive. My first series of attacks were simply to probe your defense, my observations were similar to those that I have already made about your offensive capabilities. You can predict the pattern of my attack even before I attempt anything. However, my last attack was the true test; it was beyond the range of your vision. You should not have been able to block it unless you already knew it was coming."

"What if I hadn't been able to block it?"

"I was already sure of your ability, thus I knew that you would."

"You could've killed me!"

"You could have told me the truth from the beginning," countered Calador in a calm voice, closing the fan of blades, re-hooking them together.

"What truth?"

"That you possess the Ghostsight."

"I don't even know what that is."

Calador's ears twitched. "You are telling the truth. It seems Sir Syndil has been keeping secrets from you."

"I don't understand," said Danny, re-sheathing his own sword.

"The Ghostsight is a powerful technique possessed only by the Mageknight. It is said that it first appears in the form of a faint image, outlining one's opponent. The outline, which is said to look like a ghost, predicts the actions of the other, allowing the Mageknight to anticipate any attack or overcome any defense."

Danny dropped his gaze. He felt confused as he wondered why Sir Syndil would've lied to him.

"You do possess the Ghostsight, yes?" his voice was little more than a whisper.

"What you describe is exactly what I experience."

"Yet, Sir Syndil has not told you as much?"

"No."

"However, his instruction has focused on this ability, yes?"

"Yes," said Danny, turning his head to the side. "If I were to make this known, how would others react?" he asked, glancing up, waiting for the answer.

"It would be a time of great rejoicing, Danny," said Calador, stepping forward, placing a reassuring hand on Danny's right shoulder. "It is thought that the awakening of the Mageknight will see an end to the threat of the Shadows. You would be held in great honor."

"Sir Syndil said that I'd be treated differently, possibly shunned. Why would he tell me that?"

"As I have said before, Danny, Sir Syndil is ever in pursuit of his own agenda. Perhaps his curiosity drove him to lie in order to unravel the mystery of the Ghostsight for himself. Your guess would be as good as my own. In any case, the King of the Light must be made aware of this discovery."

"No!"

Calador's silence, in addition to his curious expression, gave way to his unsaid question.

"I've already lied to my friends about this," Danny's voice grew softer.

"You name them friends for a reason, Squire, I am sure they would understand."

"It's not just that," continued Danny, his voice nothing more than a whisper. However, he knew that Calador could hear him. "I wish to confront Sir Syndil. I want to know why he lied to me."

"That one does not respond well to confrontation, Danny. If you challenge him openly, you will never learn his true intentions. Sir Syndil possesses a calculating mind. Any answer you received would be wrapped in lies and manipulation."

"You make it sound as if he is a traitor."

Calador looked toward the ceiling of rock and took a deep breath. "I have never questioned his loyalty to the Light, Danny, merely the means by which he conducts his patronage."

"Then I'll continue to train under him until he reveals his true intentions."

Calador dropped his gaze to Danny's eyes as if his sight had never left him. "The heir of the Mageknight may very well be standing before me, you would ask me to keep this information secret?"

"Yes," said Danny. "You're just as curious as I am about Sir Syndil's intentions and if you wish to know the truth, then you will keep this secret. As you said, if challenged, we may never know the truth."

Calador stood silently at length, weighing Danny's words.

"So be it," he said, with a smile that dominated the right side of his mouth.

25

The Truth among Friends

Returning to the barracks, Danny wasn't surprised to find his friends waiting up for him, their expressions radiated curiosity. Seeing Danny's stoic expression, they realized something was wrong.

"What did Calador want, man?" Chris asked.

Before Danny could answer, they heard four bells, it was eight o'clock. He waited as the last broad tone faded away.

"I have something to tell all of you," said Danny, only after shutting the heavy wooden door behind him.

Matt, he'd been lying down, sat straight up, ears ready for anything.

Once he had everyone's attention, Danny began his tale. He started at the beginning, the first time he used the Ghostsight, during his fight with Steven Rooney. He told them about his interaction with Sir Syndil and the advice he had received during the testing, the same testing they had all undergone, it seemed like such a long time ago. He went on to tell them about the one-on-one training offered to him by Sir Syndil. He detailed his duel with Squire Rigil, explaining the role the Ghostsight had played in his victory. He finished his account by explaining what he'd learned from Calador and the action plan they had agreed upon recently.

"So, you're this Mageknight everyone's talking about?" Alonso asked, his voice was thick with jealousy.

"I don't know," Danny said, looking down. "It's possible, I guess, but how could I be the Mageknight when I failed to pull the sword from the Pool of the Mageknight? You were all there and you all watched me fail."

"We all failed, man, but you can always try again," Chris added.

"I'm not sure if I want to try again."

"...Why not?"

Danny looked toward the window as he continued, "I don't know if I want the attention that's promised to the one who takes up the sword of the Mageknight. Calador said that it would be a time of rejoicing. He said it would be my responsibility to lead the Light in the destruction of the Shadows, but I barely know the first thing about them. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

Chris stood up and smiled. "I understand why you kept the truth to yourself," he said with encouragement. "I don't know if I would've done the same in your place, but I understand why you did what you did. We've all been in training for about a couple of months now and I barely understand anything. None of us are Lightborn and we're all first-years. What matters most is that you told us the truth, no matter what... we're all in this together."

"Thanks, man," Danny said, breathing a sigh of relief. He felt as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. However, something else balanced heavily upon him still. He knew he had to tell Sabrina the truth as well.

"Are you going to tell Sabrina?" Chris asked, almost reading his mind.

"I don't know."

"If I was the Mageknight, I wouldn't tell anyone," added Alonso, lying in bed with his hands propped behind his head.

All five boys turned toward Alonso and chuckled at his familiar sentiment. Out of all of Danny's friends, Alonso was the most likely candidate to use manipulation and lies and it gave Danny an idea. He knew that Alonso was more like Sir Syndil than anyone else; he couldn't resist asking Alonso a theoretical question.

"If you were Sir Syndil," posing the question to Alonso carefully, "what would be your motivation to lie to me?"

Alonso looked toward the ceiling as he pondered the question. After several moments, he responded, "I think I'd lie for a few reasons. Perhaps, I'd lie to measure your ability and try to learn it for myself." Alonso jumped up, looked at Danny with a hopeful expression and asked, "By the way, is it possible to teach me the Ghostsight?"

Danny shook his head, "I don't think so."

Alonso simply shrugged, propped himself back onto his bed and continued. "I suppose I might lie to use you in some way. Maybe, by keeping you a secret,

Sir Syndil thinks he can elevate himself in rank, possibly even to the position of King of the Light. If you are the Mageknight, perhaps everyone would listen to you if you said Sir Syndil should be King of the Light."

"You did say that Sir Syndil took Calador's sight and Bonded to keep his position as captain, am I right?" Matt added.

"Yeah," said Danny, considering the possibility and finding it somewhat plausible.

"Or... " Alonso said as he raised his finger into the air to indicate that he wasn't done speaking, "he might be testing your abilities as the Mageknight to decide what side he wants to be on."

"What do you mean?" Doug asked.

"According to Sir William in our History of the Light class, the Light has been at war with the Shadows for hundreds of years."

"You mean you actually listened in class?" Matt asked, more than surprised.

"I'm not as stupid as you all think I am," rebutted Alonso.

"I'm not so sure about that," argued Matt, more to himself than for Alonso's displeasure.

Alonso responded with a look that would have killed Matt if such things were possible. "Would you like to duel to settle this argument?" he challenged, reaching down for the hilt of his sword.

"That won't be necessary," intervened Chris, stepping between them. "Cut it out," he said to Matt. Turning toward Alonso, he asked, "What's your point, man?"

Removing his hand from the pommel of his blade, Alonso relaxed, sat back in his bed and crossed his arms. "As I was saying before being interrupted, according to Sir William, the first Mageknight forced the Shadows to retreat to their own realm when no one else could, but that was hundreds of years ago."

"After which, the Mageknight died and was placed in a Bonded," added Doug. "There's no indication of how he died. Whether he died during the last battle with the Shadows or sometime after, there's no mention of it in the texts; I know because I've looked."

Alonso ignored the intrusion and continued. "In Shadow Lore classes, Sir Ranald has said that Shadow sightings and attacks have increased over the past few years."

"He compared it to the beginning of the first war against the Shadows," inserted Anthony.

All five boys turned to look at Anthony, eyebrows raised.

"What?" Anthony asked in his defense, adding, "I pay attention too, you know."

"So, we all pay attention in class," said Danny, turning back toward Alonso, "what does all of this have to do with Sir Syndil?"

Alonso sat up at a slight angle. "It means that if you *are* the Mageknight, war is inevitable and Sir Syndil wants to know who he should side with, the Light or the Dark."

"But Calador said that Sir Syndil was not a traitor. He said that he has always been loyal to the Light."

"How do you know you can trust Calador?" Doug asked. "Assuming he is telling the truth about Sir Syndil taking his sight and destroying his Bonded in a duel, what if he is trying to use you to get back at Sir Syndil?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"The question becomes, who can we trust?" Chris added.

"Each other only," said Danny, locking eyes with each of his friends. "We trust neither Sir Syndil nor Calador."

Anthony leaned forward, placing his elbow upon his knee, causing his bicep to swell to massive proportions. "And do what?"

"Can Briza be trusted?" Danny asked of Doug.

Doug nodded, "I think so... yes."

"And what, we add another Elf to the mix," interrupted Alonso, ever the cynic. "I don't trust their kind, especially now."

"She can be trusted, I guarantee it," argued Doug.

Alonso was about to counter with a comment of his own before Danny interrupted. "We're going to need her help, if Doug vouches for her, we can trust her."

"Whatever," said Alonso, sinking deeper into the mattress.

"So, what's the plan?" Matt asked.

"You and Alonso, research the archives and look for any information that proves Calador's story."

"Why do I have to go to the library?" whined Alonso.

"You want to prove to us that you aren't as dumb as we think you are, right?"

Alonso allowed his silence to answer for him.

"Then, here is your chance."

"Whatever."

"I also need you to find out all you can about the Mageknight. It's very important that you find out if the Ghostsight is everything that Calador says it is. I need to know if I'm being used."

Alonso shrugged and added, "Fine."

"What about the rest of us?" Doug asked.

"You and Briza, follow Calador. Watch for anything out of the ordinary, anything suspicious. I'll leave it up to you to tell Briza everything."

Doug agreed.

"Chris and Anthony, you two follow Sir Syndil."

"And what're you going to do?" Chris asked.

"While you're following Sir Syndil, I'm going to search his quarters."

26

Problem Solved

"T here are three known types of Shadows," Sir Ranald Buttle explained, from the head of the classroom. "Worker Shadows are the most common," he continued, walking down the center most aisle of sturdy wooden desks. "Often appearing humanoid and shy, smaller than a normal, they are the weakest in ability and strength. However, they are not to be taken lightly. The claws of a Worker Shadow have been known to cut through the strongest metal; most of our armor would not protect you against a direct attack from one. They are more commonly distinguished by a haze of black mist that makes up the core of their body as well as glowing red eyes." Rounding the back of the room, working his way down the aisle on the left, he asked, "Who can tell me another characteristic of a Worker Shadow?"

Without looking at the textbook in front of him, Danny's hand went up, others followed suit.

"Yes, Squire Rovert?" Sir Ranald noted, pointing to a blond-haired boy sitting just in front of Danny.

"They remain incorporeal up until moments before they attack," the squire said as he dropped his hand.

"And incorporeal means what?" Sir Ranald turned back to face the class from the front of the room.

"It means that any object or weapon not imbued with magic will pass harmlessly through them," explained Squire R overt.

"Good," Sir Ranald said with a smile. "But, remember this as well, Shadows can pass through any substance without hindrance, walls, water, or the ground beneath your feet, making this ability extremely tricky. However, as Squire R overt has explained, Shadows must become solid moments before they attack and that is their weakness. If you ever find yourself facing a Shadow without your weapon, which should never happen in the first place, counter attacking with whatever you might have available at just the right moment could prove the difference between life and death. Attack too soon and your attack will yield nothing but air, attack too late and their claws will cut through your armor like water.

"Who can tell me another type of Shadow?" Sir Ranald asked, turning back to his long desk, retrieving a textbook.

"Danny," whispered Matt, sitting just to Danny's left.

His concentration interrupted, Danny turned toward his friend.

"This is all we've found so far on the Mageknight," he continued, handing Danny a folded piece of parchment. "We'll go back to the library after class, but there's a problem."

"What's the problem?" Danny asked, snatching the paper the instant Sir Ranald turned his back.

"In order to get into the archives, you need a pass from one of the professors," adjusting his glasses with a nervous twitch.

"Squire Firoth and Squire Mickler, I assume you both have an answer for the class since you seem to be so talkative," Sir Ranald interjected in an exaggerated tone.

Danny looked up, Sir Ranald had somehow made his way to the middle of the second aisle without him noticing; he was standing only two desks to his right. He couldn't remember what the class had been discussing because he was so caught up in his conversation with Matt.

"Had you been listening, you would have heard Squire Faussett enlighten the class on another type of Shadow, a Soldier Shadow," added Sir Ranald, knowing that neither boy had a clue. "Perhaps one of you would like to give us a common characteristic of the Soldier Shadow?"

Both Danny and Matt glanced at one another. "They're big," said Matt, with a subtle hint of doubt in his voice.

"An impressive guess," said Sir Ranald, not amused. "I will expect to see both of you after class," he added, before continuing in a broader voice. "It is

true that Soldier Shadows tend to be much larger than their Worker Shadow counterparts."

Drowning out Sir Ranald's voice, shrugging off the reprimand, Danny unfolded the parchment, placed it within his open textbook and began to read Matt's scribbled notes.

Mageknight

The Mageknight first appeared during a battle with the Shadows on the coast of Scotland, near a small village called Fife. This took place during the beginning of the initial conflict with the Shadows. The Shadows had ventured out from the island of White Rock, destroying everything and everyone in their path. Since only those with the gift of sight could see them, it made battling them almost impossible. During this time, the Human race, Elves, Dwarves, and the Dragonic were all at odds with one another. At that time, all four races were divided against the threat of the Shadows. A Human, Magear Rolk Knight, turned the tide of the battle, forcing the Shadow offensive back. Sir Magear was later nicknamed Mageknight. It's written that the Mageknight united the four races under one banner, the Light. The text describes the Mageknight as being unmatched in battle and possessing the unique ability of the Ghostsight. The ability allowed the Mageknight to anticipate any attack in any direction so he could never be surprised. It's said that he could even predict the movements of a single enemy to an entire army. Some thought the Mageknight could even predict the future.

Danny's mouth opened in surprise after reading the last sentence, he wondered what it would be like to possess the ability to predict the future. Looking at the back of the page, he noticed that Matt had added a scribbled postscript.

P.S.

*A pass from a professor is needed to enter the archives.
There may be more information on the Mageknight there.*

"Squire Firoth!" Sir Ranald called out from the front of the class. "Can you name the third and most powerful of the Shadows?"

Caught red-handed, Danny looked up with a dumfounded expression. "Um... "

"Gran," whispered Matt.

"A Gran Shadow," Danny said, after a moment of hesitation.

"I am glad you decided to rejoin us," rebutted Sir Ranald. Strolling down the middle aisle, he continued. "That is correct, a Gran Shadow. Squire Mickler, would you be so bold as to enlighten us with a few characteristics of this type of Shadow?" Stopping within a few feet of Matt's desk, Sir Ranald leaned over and placed his right hand on the edge of the desk.

Pushing his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, Matt peered up. "Gran Shadows always appear humanoid in shape and size, from a distance; they can be confused with allies. Their solid forms differ from the smoky appearance of the Worker and Soldier Shadows. The Knights of the Light that lived to tell the tale often report their skin as pitch-black with the same colored hair and glowing blue eyes." A small smile stretched across Matt's face as he leaned back in his chair.

"A textbook description," said Sir Ranald, adding, "almost word for word." Erect once again, he continued his stride toward the back of the room. "Gran Shadows are the most powerful class of Shadow that we know about. Only the strongest of knights have lived to tell of their encounter and most do not live much longer after telling it. However, some believe that there is a fourth class

of Shadow, one beyond the Gran. A class even more powerful, not one knight among the order has ever lived to tell about it."

A moment of silence passed within the classroom, as if Sir Ranald intended to add a dramatic effect to the weight of his words. However, the affect was cut short as the first of ten chimes signaled the end of the class. Jumping up from their seats, the squires gathered their books and their belongings and prepared to leave.

"Remember, we will have a quiz next week!" Sir Ranald yelled over the rising noise.

Gathering up his own belongings, Danny turned to Matt. "How'd you know about the Grans?"

Matt produced a sly smile. "I'm a fast reader and I read ahead."

As soon as everyone was gone, Danny and Matt worked their way to the front to face Sir Ranald, his arms crossed, his gaze alternating back and forth between them.

"Both of you have been chosen to honor this school and become full-fledged Knights of the Light. Such an honor comes with a significant amount of danger, this class may someday see to your survival. You do understand this, I hope?"

"Yes, Professor Ranald," Danny and Matt said, almost in unison.

"Good, then you will understand why I expect a five-page essay on the subject we were just discussing, due by next week."

Matt let out a soft groan in response.

"I could easily make it ten, Squire Mickler," added Sir Ranald. After clearing his throat with a subtle grunt, he continued. "The next time I catch you two not paying attention, the punishment will be much more severe." With that, he turned his attention back to his desk, it was littered with disorganized parchments; he waved both boys away.

Matt's head drooped down as he turned to walk away; Matt stopped as he heard Danny speaking to Sir Ranald.

"Sir Ranald?" Danny asked.

"What is it, Squire Firoth?" Sir Ranald said as he continued to shuffle through the disaster that was his desk.

"Can we have a couple of passes to get into the archives so that we can research the subject in depth?" Danny asked, with a hint of a smile.

Sir Ranald looked up to meet Danny's steady gaze.

Danny replaced his smile with a flat expression very quickly.

After contemplating the request, Sir Ranald produced a smile of his own. "That is a good idea, Squire Firoth. The archives have invaluable information regarding the three classes of Shadows." Bending down, he pulled out a drawer on the left side of his desk, reached in and retrieved two small squares of red

parchment. After jotting the necessary information down, in nearly unreadable scribbles, he offered them to Danny and said, "I look forward to reading what you have discovered." His eyes grew wider. "I could spend hours and hours in the archives, just researching and reading."

Danny noticed that he'd stumbled upon one of Sir Ranald's most cherished hobbies. "Thank you, Sir Ranald," he offered, before the blond-haired professor could ramble on.

"Uh, yes... of course, Squire Firoth," Sir Ranald said, looking a little disappointed. Regaining his composure, he returned to the tasks at hand, adding, "Next week, then. I shall expect both of your essays to be completed."

With that, Danny turned and shot Matt a quick smile, both boys left the classroom in a hurry. Holding the two small passes in front of him, Danny said, "Problem solved."

27

Spying on Sir Syndil

Danny slipped around the corner of an alleyway, he saw Chris and Anthony waiting across from the double doors that marked the entrance to Sir Syndil's classroom. Danny snuck up behind them and kept his back snug to the wall, trying to make as little sound as possible.

"Hey, guys," he whispered.

Both boys jumped as they swiveled around to confront the intruder. Anthony's right hand shot to the hilt of the huge greatsword that lined his back, Chris smiled with relief when he saw who had spoken to them.

"That's not funny, man," Chris said to Danny, as he grabbed Anthony's hand and pulled it away from the pommel of his sword. "And you need to calm down."

"Sorry."

"Has he left yet?" Danny asked.

Chris shook his head from side to side. Two seconds later, one of the double doors creaked open.

"Back," whispered Chris, swinging his arm wide, forcing Anthony and Danny behind him.

All three boys watched as Sir Syndil exited the building, closed the door behind him and began walking in the opposite direction.

"Alright, you know what to do," said Danny.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Chris asked.

Danny tucked his chin in approval. "Just remember, if he looks like he's coming back, one of you needs to come and warn me."

Chris nodded before stalking around the corner with Anthony in tow.

Danny waited until Sir Syndil, Chris and Anthony were out of sight before crossing the distance to the double doors. Testing the handle, he found both doors locked. Doors were seldom locked on White Rock Island. Cursing his luck, he looked both ways to make sure he wasn't being watched. The area seemed deserted as he slipped to the left of the building and entered a meager alleyway. Looking up, he noticed a series of slender windows nearly seven feet above him.

Gathering a couple choice items from the alley, an empty barrel and a sturdy wooden box, Danny piled them on top of each other and climbed to the top, his chin was level with the window sill. Finding no handhold to help him open the double-paned window, he unsheathed his sword and leveled the tip at the bottom. Wedging the point between the window and the sill, he used the sword to force it open. Finding the window unlocked, he sighed softly as it slid up. He sheathed his sword, lifted the window up the rest of the way, heaved his body up and over and slipped inside. Dangling for a moment, he released his grip and dropped the few feet to the floor. Finding a stout wooden chair and standing on it, he reached up and re-secured the window.

Looking around, he found the familiar sight and smell of the dueling room out of place without Sir Syndil. His eyes were drawn to the wall of weapons displayed before him. Refocusing, he willed his eyes from the alluring sight and rushed over to Sir Syndil's large oak desk.

The old desk was clear of clutter, well-organized, papers piled in neat stacks, complete with a black quill and ink placed within reaching distance from the chair. Danny had no doubt that Calador had told him the truth about Sir Syndil's tendency to be purpose-driven, everything he did seemed to have some sort of purpose. Searching through the papers and looking through the desk drawers, Danny found nothing incriminating. Assuming he even knew what he was looking for in the first place, which he didn't. He made sure to put everything back just as he'd found it. He didn't want Sir Syndil's compulsive tidiness to be his undoing.

Sighing, Danny looked elsewhere, his eyes lingered on the brass door that marked Sir Syndil's personal quarters. Figuring that would be the next-best place to look, he walked over to the door; he was relieved to find it unlocked. Twisting the doorknob, he forced the heavy door open, it made a subtle squeak.

The room was rather dim, lit by a single circular window. To the right, Danny noticed a small but adequate bed with a brass backing and silvery sheets. A small workstation, complete with a level desk, lined the back wall, and a large bookcase filled to the brim with tomes and manuscripts satisfied the space to the left. Overall, it was just as Danny imagined it, quaint but functional.

Beginning with the bookshelf to his left, Danny skimmed through the selections, the majority were about Shadows and the rest were about swordsmanship and weapons of old. Toward the bottom of the collection, he noticed a space, a book should have been there.

Turning, focusing his search on the workstation, he discovered the missing book, cracked open mid-way through, displayed upon the slanted desk. Inserting two fingers between the cracked pages, he closed the book and investigated the title, written in elegant gold letters on the spine. "*Lore of The Mageknight*," he read aloud, his voice little more than a whisper. Turning back to the open page, he read the chapter caption displayed in bold black letters; "*The Gift of Ghostsight*." Skimming the text, Danny discovered that the description of the Ghostsight fit his own ability without the slightest hint of doubt.

Danny's breath caught in his chest, this book was proof that Sir Syndil had known about his ability from the start. Calador's accusation proved to be correct, for whatever reason, Sir Syndil was lying.

Unable to pull his eyes from the pages of the book, Danny read on as the words described the Ghostsight in more detail. It was written that the Ghostsight was believed to have the ability to predict the future, even see the past. It seemed that forecasting the movements of others was only the beginning. Reading further, Danny realized that the text grew vague. The book hadn't been written by the Mageknight, it was based upon outside accounts, incidents of those who'd fought by his side.

"Predict the future or even see the past," Danny whispered to the empty room. He suddenly wished for just such an ability, it would serve him well in his current situation. Then again, according to the text, he did possess the beginnings of the Ghostsight. Thus, who was to say he didn't already possess the ability to foresee events in the more distant future rather than just a few seconds ahead or even the past?

Making up his mind to try, Danny began the rhythmic in and out of the breathing technique Sir Syndil had taught him. Closing his eyes, clearing his mind, he tightened every muscle in his body, causing his knuckles to clench and turn white from exertion. Then, allowing his body to relax, he opened his eyes and jumped back as *a ghostly outline of Sir Syndil appeared in front of him*.

Danny took a step backward, giving the apparition plenty of room.

The wraith of Sir Syndil was sitting on the stool in front of the desk, looking down, studying the tome that Danny had just finished reading.

"What's going on?" Danny asked the specter.

Sir Syndil stirred, his head arose in response.

Thinking that the wraith had heard him, Danny's hand drifted to the sword at his side, fingering the cool metal of the hilt.

Sir Syndil stood and turned as Danny pulled the blade halfway free. However, Danny stopped as the transparent eyes of the apparition looked unknowingly past him. Stepping forward, Sir Syndil walked within striking distance of Danny's sword, but made no threatening movements.

Hesitating, Danny gasped with shock as *Sir Syndil continued his advance, passed harmlessly through him, and continued out of the room.* Loosening the breath he'd kept pent-up in a deep sigh, Danny turned and followed Sir Syndil back into the training room.

Sir Syndil moved with determined steps, passing by his long desk and crossing the right half of the dueling circle.

Danny followed close behind.

Sir Syndil stopped in front of the far wall, a slender, ornate dagger decorated the space in front of him. Reaching up to grasp the weapon, his fingers hovered close to the hilt. Then, with a twist of the wrist, his hand passed through the golden pommel and disappeared, along with the rest of his ghostly form, leaving Danny alone and confused.

What was that, the past, the future or something else? Danny took the few remaining steps toward the wall and investigated the small gilded dagger that hung before him. It was a beautiful weapon, made from gold with an inlaid strip of silver, but not meant for combat. Danny thumbed the edge. Gripping the hilt, mimicking Sir Syndil's specter's actions, Danny gave it a quick twist to the right.

The dagger turned without much resistance, stopping tip-down, making a loud click. The sound of gears working echoed through the wall and the floor. Then, the gritty sound of stone grinding against stone erupted from somewhere behind him. Spinning quickly, Danny caught the end of the movement as a slab of stone, the section that made up the center of the dueling circle, slid down and to the right, leaving a dark, rectangular hole visible.

Releasing his hold on the golden dagger, Danny crept to the middle of the circle and peered into the secret opening. Kneeling, he could see only darkness. Freeing his dragon-hilted dagger, he held the blade before him, the soft glow of the brand created just enough light for him to spot a triangular wooden box glazed with a reddish finish sitting just below the surface. Faltering for a split-second, he steeled his resolve and removed the box from its secret storage compartment. It was heavy and smooth to the touch.

Placing it just to the left of the hole, Danny fiddled with the silver latch that held the box shut and it opened with a click. Prying the top open, he found a spherical object sitting there wrapped in a piece of soft black leather. Nearly the

size of his head, Danny was surprised by the weight of the object. Unwrapping the leather covering, he held a large globe of black glass in his hand. Upon closer inspection, he watched as a mass of shadows swirled within, like sheets of dark fabric fluttering in the wind.

However, what truly amazed him was that the twirling shades inside seemed to extend beyond the barrier of the glass, as if something within wished desperately to reach out and touch him.

Danny was mesmerized. Against his better judgment seemingly not of his own volition, his right hand moved closer and closer toward the black globe, causing the dancing gloom within to flap with an increasing flurry. Just before he touched it, a hurried rattle echoed from the double doors behind him, breaking his concentration, causing him to spin toward the sound.

"Sir Syndil!" Danny whispered as his breath caught in his throat in sudden fear.

"Danny, are you in there?" a familiar voice asked from the opposite side of the twin doors.

Danny sighed with relief as he recognized Anthony's deep voice. "What is it?"

"Sir Syndil is on his way back. You need to get out of there."

"Okay, give me a second," said Danny, twisting back to the mysterious black orb. Regretfully, he re-wrapped the sphere in soft black leather, closed the top of the box and latched it shut. Hefting the box back into its secret compartment, he ran to the wall and rotated the golden dagger to its original position. The sounds of gears grinding and stone sliding reverberated through the floor as the slab of stone glided into place, making the dueling circle whole once again.

Rushing, he made his way to the double doors and unlocked them from the inside. Then, after opening them, he re-locked them before shutting them behind him and sprinted to the small alley across the street.

"Did you find anything?" Anthony asked.

Danny had no time to answer as he spotted Sir Syndil round the far corner, just a short way down the street. Ducking deeper into the shadowy alley, he pulled Anthony with him. They watched from their secreted spot as Sir Syndil walked up to the double doors with an even pace, unlocked them with a shiny silver key and disappeared within.

Danny allowed the breath he'd been holding to escape slowly. "That was too close."

Moments later, Chris joined them, a relieved expression on his face. He was glad that Anthony had warned Danny in time.

"Was Sir Syndil up to anything?" Danny asked.

Chris shook his head. "He simply went for a walk. ...Nothing out of the ordinary that I could see. What about you?"

Danny dropped his gaze, he wasn't sure what he'd found or even how he'd found it, for that matter. Confused by the events unfolding around him, he simply said, "You could say I found something."

28

Putting the Pieces Together

The next day, just after dinner, Danny met with Chris, Alonso, Anthony and Matt in a secluded corner of the common hall.

"Where is Doug and Briza?" Danny asked, looking around.

Anthony simply shrugged, denying any knowledge.

"Haven't seen them," commented Matt, pushing up his glasses.

"Last I heard, they were following Calador," Chris added.

"I told you we couldn't trust that Elf girl," chimed in Alonso.

Danny had called this meeting hoping that some helpful information had been discovered. He had news of his own and he wanted to begin a detailed search into the origin of the object he'd found within Sir Syndil's classroom. However, it wasn't like Doug to be late, especially with Briza in his company.

Danny had picked this quiet spot next to the fireplace to meet for Briza's benefit, since females weren't allowed to venture into the boys' side of the barracks and vice versa. Looking around, he noticed that few remained in the common hall. Some had already wandered off to bed, tired from the long day of training. He was sure they wouldn't be overheard.

"We will just have to continue without them," Danny said after a long pause. "One of us will fill them in later."

"You said you found something in Sir Syndil's classroom," said Chris in a questioning tone.

"I..." However, his voice cut off as he saw Calador enter the common hall with Doug and Briza in tow, pushing them forward, stern hands on their shoulders.

Matt let out a shallow gasp. "That's not good," he said, putting Danny's inner thoughts into words.

Forced forward with Calador behind them, Doug and Briza radiated utter failure. Their eyes said it all. They had been caught.

Calador stopped them just before the rounded table that Danny and his friends had claimed for their own. "Is there a reason these two have been following me around for the past couple of days? Do not get me wrong, Squire Hollinger is quite skilled in the art of stealth, as are most Elves, however, I could hear Squire Garrett's breathing from nearly a mile away."

Doug's gaze drooped even further as the details of his capture became evident.

"Well?"

"I had to be sure we could trust you," said Danny.

"You cannot trust me," said Calador, releasing Briza and Doug, allowing them to take their seats at the table.

"Sorry," Doug said glumly as he sat down.

"My apologies," added Briza with a slight bow.

"I am a stranger to you," continued Calador, crossing his arms. "I have given you no reason to trust me, nor any reason not to trust me. That is a decision you must make on your own. However, having two inexperienced squires risk themselves against a superior opponent is not the best strategy." The tall Elf paused for a moment. Then, leaning forward and placing both hands on the table, he said, "Please tell me that you have not been trying to follow Sir Syndil around as well."

All of those seated dropped their gaze, admitting their guilt.

"Foolish," scolded Calador. "Sir Syndil is as skilled as I. He could have easily discovered you, just as I have, assuming that he has not done so already. Tell me, who was it that you assigned to that detail?"

"I appointed Squire Chris and Squire Anthony," Danny said, looking at the two in question.

"Squire Greene is a capable fighter," admitted Calador, "but he is not built for stealth. And that one's footsteps are like a beating drum," he added, pointing at Anthony. "You will have to assume that Sir Syndil knew he was being followed, and I will assume then that you have already told your friends about our discussion, Squire Firoth," he said, taking his hands from the table,

straightening his back, and folding his arms across his chest once again. "How much have you told them?"

"...Everything."

"Your trust in your friends is admirable, Squire Firoth, but dangerous. I once considered Sir Syndil a friend as well."

"I trust them with my life."

"Indeed you do," said Calador with a subtle smile. "Well, then, Squire Hollinger and Squire Garrett, please tell your friends about the conspicuous activities I have been involved in over the past few days."

Briza spoke up first. "He visits with Sir Bartlett Firebeard often, entering the forge for hours at a time."

"An old friend," added Calador, motioning for Briza to continue.

"He tends to frequent the library and a small cavern on the southeast end of the island," continued Briza.

"The library has a substantial collection of books written in Braille; I am unable to read texts scribed in the traditional way due to my handicap. The cave, of course, is my desired place of training, as you all know, assuming Squire Firoth did, in fact, tell you everything." Pausing, Calador waited for a moment before adding, "And your conclusion is, Squire Hollinger?"

Looking rather uncomfortable, Briza met Danny's gaze as if she was seeking his permission to continue.

Danny nodded, encouraging her to do so.

"Your movements were not suspicious," said Briza. "I can find no reason to condemn you."

"That doesn't necessarily mean that you aren't guilty of something," said Matt with a squint, adjusting his glasses. "You said that you knew you were being followed. How do we know that you were simply not doing anything suspicious in order to appear trustworthy?"

"You do not know," said Calador, matter-of-factly. "However, I am aware that you and Squire Martinez have been visiting the library of late, more specifically, the archives. I am assuming this has been in response to what I discussed with Squire Firoth. If you would be so kind as to discuss what you found, it may shed some light on my trustworthiness."

"How could you know that?" Matt asked.

"I may be blind, Squire, but I am not without my senses."

Matt hesitated, he glanced at Danny with a questioning expression.

"It will do no harm for Calador to hear your findings as well," said Danny. "Especially since he already appears to know," he added with a hint of sarcasm.

With Danny's assurance, Matt reached into his robes and produced a rolled-up piece of yellow parchment. After fiddling with his glasses with one hand and spreading the paper out in front of him with the other, he skimmed the

scribbled black text. After a moment, he said, "What we found in the archives matches Calador's description of what happened about seventy seven years ago. A third-year squire, Calador Varackice Con Dillion, challenged Squire Syndil Sartak Tribolari, the captain of Dragon Army. During the duel, Squire Dillion's Bonded was shattered and his eyesight lost.

"It was ruled an accident, allowing Squire Tribolari to continue his training and eventually become Sir Syndil, a Knight of the Light, while Calador devoted his life to serving the Light despite his losses." Rolling the single piece of parchment up and secreting it back into the fold of his robes, Matt added, "The archives were quite vague."

"Is it not amazing how the single most defining moment of one's life can be summed up with but a few words," said Calador, his head tilted up as if he was staring at something unknown on the ceiling. "To those that penned the archives, it was simply a small matter of record. However, to me, it is the ending and the beginning of two separate lives."

"If I was you, I would've gotten revenge on him long ago," said Alonso.

Calador's head snapped downward, as if to meet the eyes of Alonso directly. "You misunderstand me, Squire Martinez, it is not revenge I seek. I have made my peace with what happened long ago." Then, after turning his blunted gaze on everyone in turn, as if he could see, he continued. "All of you must understand that Sir Syndil has taken a great deal of interest in your friend, Danny. His focus knows no bounds, and he will not stop until he has gotten what he wants. His attention is dangerous and I know this first hand; I was once the center of his interest. Whatever it is he wants from your friend, Sir Syndil will stop at nothing to gain it.

"Tis not a grudge I hold against him. I carry no hatred in my heart for Sir Syndil. I simply refuse to allow a similar tragedy to befall Squire Firoth. It is my duty, as your caretaker, to look after you any way I see fit."

Danny was taken aback by Calador's openness. His words had been calm, without fierce emotion, yet there was sincerity in them as well.

"We've found nothing condemning in Sir Syndil's movements, Calador," explained Chris in light of the sustained silence.

"Nor would you, Squire Greene, as I said in the beginning, he has been aware of your intrusions, of that you can be certain."

"Then why wouldn't he just come forward and confront us like you have?" Anthony asked.

"...Because that would ruin his advantage."

"What advantage?"

Calador cleared his throat. "If Sir Syndil knows you are following him, he will continue to make his movements inconspicuous. He will allow you to see what he wants you to see."

"I see," said Anthony, as if lost in thought.

"Duh," antagonized Alonso.

"Shut up!" Anthony said, his voice growing into a growl.

"Why don't you make me," said Alonso in a similar tone.

"Perhaps, we should settle this in a duel," said Anthony, his hand inching toward the rounded head of the hilt upon his back.

"That's enough, you two!" Chris intervened, before the argument could go any further. "We're all tired," he explained, "and we've just learned that our time has been wasted. However, fighting among ourselves isn't going to solve anything."

"What will you do now?" Calador asked Danny.

Danny still had one piece of information that might prove helpful, the object he'd discovered in Sir Syndil's classroom. However, he didn't trust Calador completely and he was reluctant to tell the Elf everything until he'd exhausted all of his other resources.

"I don't know," said Danny after a moment, not necessarily a lie, "but we will let you know when we've decided."

"You still do not trust me," said Calador, as if reading Danny's thoughts.

"No, I don't," said Danny honestly. "I trust those I see around me because they're my friends. They're squires, like me. If I need your help, I'll come to you."

"You play a dangerous game, Mageknight," said Calador, causing Danny to shift in his seat. It was the first-time anyone had referred to him as the prophesied warrior. "I shall allow you to keep your secret, for the time being, but know this... should it serve in your best interest and protect you from Sir Syndil's ambitions, I will reveal your true identity to the King of the Light." With that said, Calador bowed with a flexible elegance and added, "I wish you all a gentle night of respite, the seventh bell is nearly upon us," he departed.

"I'm sorry, we messed up," said Doug again, once he was sure Calador was out of earshot.

"You and Briza have nothing to be sorry for," said Danny. "Calador is obviously skilled at what he does."

"Shall I attempt to follow him on my own?" Briza asked.

"No."

"What about following Sir Syndil?" Anthony asked.

"It would seem that would be a waste of time as well," Chris said in Danny's stead.

Doug scooted closer, "So, what do we do now?"

Danny looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping, especially Calador. "I found something in Sir Syndil's classroom," he began, once he was satisfied that his words could be heard by no one else.

29

Research

"Nothing!" Alonso said, slamming the heavy tome shut with a loud thud, heaving it down on the table before him.

"...Shh!" the librarian commanded with his pointer finger pressed against his lips, he was a slender Elf with long, silvery hair.

"Did he just shush me?" Alonso asked, on the verge of anger.

"Be quiet and have some respect, man," insisted Chris, pulling his eyes up from a hefty book of his own.

"We've been at this for hours, for what?" Alonso's tone turned defiant, in hushed words. "There's nothing in these old books about the object Danny described. We've spent four long days in this library searching for some information on some kind of evil snow globe."

"Keep your voice down," Briza scolded.

"Oh great, now the other Elf is telling me what to do," said Alonso, his tone growing strained with frustration. "It's Sunday and we should be resting, not studying," he added to further his point.

"For once, I agree with him," added Matt, placing another heavy book upon the table.

"On which subject? His blatant disrespect toward Elves or that this is a waste of time?" Doug asked.

"The evil snow globe. If we haven't found anything on it by now, I don't think we ever will," said Matt.

"I'm hungry," was all Anthony had to add on the subject.

Before anyone else could comment, the first of twelve sharp chimes signaled the noon hour.

Danny sighed as the twelfth ring echoed through the library, allowing the tone to cease before he spoke. "I appreciate the dedication that all of you have given this. You're all true friends." Danny paused in order to allow the sincerity of his words to sink in before continuing, "I'm going to meet Sabrina down at the beach to tell her what has happened, as well as what we've discovered. With any luck, she'll be another pair of eyes to help in the search. Get yourselves some lunch and we'll meet back here at the tone of the tenth bell."

"Oh, thanks for your permission, Mageknight," said Alonso sarcastically.

"Or don't return if you don't like it," said Danny, slamming his hand down flat on the table with a heavy thud. The past four days of research, in addition to his training, were taking their toll on Danny's mood. "I asked for your help and you volunteered it. Help, or don't help, it's still your choice," he said, in a hushed but angry tone.

"I..." began Alonso, silenced by a heavy hand upon his shoulder as Chris stepped up behind him.

"He'll be back," assured Chris. "I think we could all use a break. We'll be here when you return, Danny."

"I'm sorry for losing it," explained Danny, running his fingers through his short brown hair, taking a calming breath. "If we haven't found anything by late tonight, I'll ask Calador for his help."

"Sounds like a good plan, man."

With that, Danny bid his friends goodbye with a wave of his hand and a nod of the head, he turned around and made a controlled dash for the library exit. Once outside, he felt somewhat better, the noonday sun bathed him in a bright amber light. Greeted by the salty sea air, he took a long slow breath deep into his lungs and released it in a sigh.

The past four days proved to be frustrating, to say the least, as they poured through piles of books with nothing to show for it. Additionally, he had to continue to pretend to trust Sir Syndil as he trained under the Elf. Danny was mentally and physically exhausted. Walking toward the edge of the island, with the promise of Sabrina's company, Danny felt better instantly. Simply thinking about her tended to make his step lighter and the world brighter. Moreover, he was glad just to be beyond the stuffy confines of the library.

Nearing the overhang of the rocky cliffs, the air grew saturated with salt, Danny could taste it on his tongue; the familiar sound of waves crashing speeded his approach. Stopping at the edge, he peered down, comforted by the rhythmic flash of Sabrina's pink-colored blade as it reflected in the sunlight. Descending the steep stone steps, he kept his gaze leveled upon her, mesmerized by the sheer grace of her movements.

Stopping a safe distance from her, well out of sword range, Danny stood and watched Sabrina, content to wait until she was finished.

For a few more minutes, Sabrina twirled, slashed and parried in a deadly dance with her Bonded, fighting some unseen foe. Finally, with a wide arc that traced the midsection of her stomach, she whipped the blade before her, leveling the rose-colored brand with her eyes. Peering past the naked steel of her Bonded, her gaze narrowed upon Danny, a smile swept across her face.

Danny took the first step forward, returning the smile. "Your bladework is perfect."

"I know," she said, as she slipped her Bonded back into the ornate sheath at her side.

"I have something I need to tell you," both said in perfect harmony, they laughed together.

Danny's expression turned stern. Sabrina seemed to be in such a good mood, suddenly he wanted nothing to do with the news he was about to tell her.

"You first," she said calmly, as if sensing the reluctance in him.

Danny faked a smile. "No, you first, mine can wait."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, you go first."

Too excited to argue, Sabrina took a few steps forward, closing the distance between them. "Dragon Army is in the semi-finals. We defeated Griffon Army last week, if we win against Phoenix Army this week, I will be dueling in the finals. You should have seen it. I iced four squires of Griffon Army and almost got one of their lieutenants."

"Iced?"

"Oh, it's a term used when you land a killing blow against an opponent in a duel, locking their armor."

"I see." Danny was well aware of Dragon Army's prowess in the Great Dome. It was rumored that they would take the Chalice of Light for the third year in a row.

"Promise me you will attend the final duel if Dragon Army makes it past the semi-finals?"

"I promise."

Sabrina beamed at the response. "Oh, what did you want to tell me?"

Danny hesitated. Seeing her so excited, in such a good mood, in contrast to her usual stern self, he couldn't burden her with his news concerning Sir Syndil or the fact that he might actually be the Mageknight. Strengthening his resolve with a quick deep breath, faking the second smile of the day, he decided not to tell her.

"It was nothing," he lied.

"You are holding something back," said Sabrina, squinting, clearly unconvinced.

"It was only about Doug and Briza," said Danny, lying for the second time, faking a smile for the third. "Those two seem to be getting closer, Doug has been talking about visiting the Elvin capital," he added, that wasn't a lie.

"...Oh really?" Sabrina asked, her curiosity outweighing her ability to see through Danny's false display of emotion.

"...So, Phoenix Army, huh?" Danny asked, changing the subject to keep the focus away from himself. For the rest of the afternoon, he kept his burdens to himself, unwilling to dampen Sabrina's good mood. They talked until the sun had fallen well beyond the rim of the toiling black clouds above. As the final streaks of sunlight touched them, Danny bid Sabrina goodbye and trudged back to the library.

He was in a better mood by then, Sabrina always had that effect on him. But the closer he got to the library, the worse his outlook became. Climbing the ivory stairs, his irritation grew with every step. Entering the ornate building, Danny found all of his friends sitting at the same table they'd shared previously, hard at work with piles of old books circling the table.

Looking up, they all showed the same confused expression.

"Where's Sabrina?" Chris asked, verbalizing the thought of everyone present.

Danny shrugged his shoulders. "I couldn't tell her."

"...Why not?"

"She seemed so happy and she already has too much to do. Dragon Army is entering the semi-finals and they will be training for the finals if they win. I just couldn't do it."

"And, what, you don't think we have other things we could be doing?" Alonso asked, raising his voice, standing.

"Shh!" the librarian repeated for the second time that day, placing a single slender finger to his lips.

"Did that Elf just shush me again!?" Alonso said, turning, as if to confront the tall librarian.

"Oh, no, you don't," said Chris, grabbing Alonso by the shoulders, forcing him back down into his chair.

Alonso struggled for a short time before giving in to Chris's superior strength, content to sit quietly with his arms crossed.

"Danny is right," said Chris in a hushed tone. "Sabrina is a second-year and she has different obligations. Any help she could've provided would've been welcome, but limited and perhaps even harmful if the other squires of Dragon Army became curious about her time away."

"Thanks, man," said Danny.

"So, what do we do now?" Matt asked.

Danny sighed. "Any luck with the archives?"

All eyes dropped to the table in frustration, except for Briza. "The object you described is not within the text," she said. "Either it is something that has never been encountered in the history of the Light or it is so old that it predates the records. If there is any information to be found about what you saw, we will not find it here."

"If that's the case, then we'll have to talk to someone who was around before the creation of the Light," observed Matt, huffing on the lenses of his glasses, wiping them clean with the sleeve of his robe.

"Briza has been telling me about the elders of the Elvin capital," said Doug, his pitch jumping a range or two in excitement. "Some of the Elves have lived well over two hundred years. Perhaps one of them could help us."

"It is true. Our recorded history predates the founding of the Light," Briza added.

"But we have no way of contacting them," Matt pointed out.

"Maybe *we* don't but we know someone who might," said Danny.

"...Who?" Chris asked.

"Calador," Danny said, as he closed the heavy book in front of him.

30

Describing a Dark Object

Late the next afternoon, after a tiring day of training, Danny sought out Calador. He found the Elf discussing various subjects with a small group of squires. While waiting for the Elf to finish his conversation, Danny found a soft seat on the edge of a nearby sofa.

He had decided to meet with Calador alone, giving the rest of his friends a well-deserved rest. Chris, of course, wanted to come, too; he was ever the faithful friend, but Danny demanded that he take time to relax.

"What if he can't help us?" a familiar voice asked from behind. Danny felt the backside of the couch slouch with the weight of another.

Danny turned to find Chris sitting next to him with his arms crossed. "I thought I told you to get some rest."

"It's not in my nature to listen to, or obey, any of your commands, Squire Firoth," Chris said with a smile.

Danny returned the smile. "Thanks, Squire Greene."

"Besides, Alonso and Anthony are already asleep, Doug is with Briza and Matt is studying. You didn't answer my question."

Danny dropped his eyes for a moment of thought. "I don't know."

The answer must have sufficed, Chris waited in silence as Calador finished his conversation with the group of squires and sent them on their way.

"How can I be of service, Squires Firoth and Greene?" Calador asked, turning toward them.

"How does he do that?" Danny whispered to himself more than anyone else.

"The same way you look at me now with your own two eyes," said Calador, standing, moving within striking distance of Chris and Danny. "It is a natural ability, it has taken the place of my eyes."

"Sometimes, I think you can see well beyond what anyone else can, just by using your ears."

"That is a strange statement coming from one that can use the Ghostsight, Mageknight."

Danny flinched at the title, he was still rankled by the label of a prophesied hero.

"What can I do for you two?"

"We need your help."

Calador nodded in acknowledgment. "Come, let us retire to a more suitable place to talk." The Elf swiveled ever-so-slightly on the heel of his foot and gracefully about-faced. Without looking back, he set off at a steady pace, walking toward the large oak door inlaid with silver that marked his personal quarters.

Danny and Chris looked at each other for an instant, before shrugging; they bounded off to follow in the blind Elf's footsteps.

Stopping in front of his door, Calador turned the knob and opened the door inward, bidding Chris and Danny to enter, hand outstretched.

Danny and Chris passed through the threshold of Calador's quarters, noting the attributes of the small room.

In the far-right corner rested a medium-sized bed, blue sheets and heavy brown blanket made up, tucked beneath the mattress without a single wrinkle. At the foot of the bed sat a large footlocker, secured with a silver latch. Arranged against the far wall, next to the bed, was a small desk, barren of the normal supplies one might see, an ink and quill or even parchment, a short stool was the only defining attribute. The white brick walls lacked any furnishings, giving the entire room a very plain look.

"Please, make yourselves at home," said Calador as he shut the door behind them and walked to the middle of the room.

"How are we to do that?" Danny asked, looking around the stark room.

"Forgive me," said Calador. "It is merely an expression that I am familiar with, one used by your race. I am, of course, aware of the lack of furnishings that make up my personal quarters. After I lost my sight, I found it meaningless to adorn the walls with artifacts that I could no longer see. In addition, training

yourself to see by listening requires a substantial amount of dedication. It also helps if there is a lack of furniture, one cannot trip if there is nothing in your way. I suppose the living arrangement stuck, I have little need of anything else. Everything you see is all that I require, a bed to sleep in, a locker for my personal things and a desk to sit at."

"You don't get many visitors, do you?" Chris said, more of an observation than a question.

"No, Squire Greene, I do not. However, such is not the reason you have come. What is it that I can do for you?"

"We need your help."

"That has already been made quite clear, Squire Firoth," said Calador, his expression lacking any kind of emotion. "What is it that you need help with?"

"Five days ago, I lied to you."

"This, too, I already know."

Danny hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I found something within Sir Syndil's personal quarters."

"And how did you manage that?" Calador asked, his pointed ears perking up.

"I snuck in while he was away."

"Although I find your choice of action very foolish, you have piqued my interest. Go on."

Danny began by detailing what he'd found inside Sir Syndil's chambers, making a point to mention the open book about the history of the Mageknight. He also told Calador about the strange vision that led him to the secret latch, in the form of a dagger, and the hatch that opened in the center of the dueling circle. Lastly, he described the dark object he had found within the box, as well as the odd feelings it had triggered.

Calador listened intently, saying nothing as Danny talked, occasionally nodding encouragingly. As soon as Danny was finished, the blind Elf tipped his right hand to the slant of his chin, stroking the point, as if in deep thought. The silence deepened as Calador contemplated Danny's words.

"Well?" Danny asked, growing frustrated. *I wish he would say something!*

"I am afraid I have no knowledge that will help you," said Calador after one last prolonged moment. "The object you have described is not known to me. However, this confirms my suspicion of Sir Syndil's interest in you," added the Elf, turning to look at something unknown. "It seems he has suspected that you might be the Mageknight for some time. That would explain the open book you found on his desk. But he has yet to present his findings to the King of the Light, suggesting that his plans for you are his own. The only missing piece of the puzzle is the mysterious object you have discovered. What purpose does it serve?" Calador questioned, in a way that seemed to serve only him.

"That's what we were hoping you could tell us."

Calador turned to focus on Danny, as if he'd forgotten that he was even there. "You have, of course, searched the archives for a description?"

"Yes," said Danny bluntly, his patience running out.

"And what did you find?"

"We could find nothing that matched Danny's description of the object," Chris piped up, as if sensing his friend's frustration.

Calador dropped his head, lost in thought once again. "It predates the records of the Light?"

"Briza said that the Elvin Elders might know something," added Chris.

Calador nodded. "It is true that Elvin history predates that of the Light by far. However, there is no guarantee that they would have any record of the object you described."

"Couldn't we at least try to contact them?" Danny asked.

"We, you say?" Calador questioned. "You are but Squires of the Light. Your place is to train here on the island and mine is to oversee that training. Besides, Elsmelda, the capital of my race's homeland, is located far to the south, deep beneath the Antarctic shelf; it requires weeks of travel by any normal means to get there. By the time we arrived, requested an audience with the Elders and gained access to the archives, it would already be too late."

"Then what're we supposed to do?!" Danny demanded, his anger beginning to resurface.

"You did not allow me to finish, Squire Firoth," said Calador, displaying a soft smile, a behavior that drew Danny's immediate attention, the Elf rarely smiled.

Danny held his tongue.

"As I was saying, it would be impossible for us to make the journey by any normal means, and with such limited time. However, I know someone who can travel by other means and is still in good standing with the Elvin Elders."

"And who might that be?"

"An old friend," Calador said cryptically.

31

Alamber Ordvack Halfelvin

After the following day's long regiment of training, Danny, along with Alonso, Matt, Chris, Anthony, Doug and Briza, met Calador just outside the double doors of the first-year barracks.

"We're here," said Danny, wondering who Calador's old friend was but respectful enough to keep his curiosity to himself.

"Who're we going to meet?" Alonso asked boldly, expressing his own thoughts uncaringly.

"Please, follow me," said Calador, ignoring Alonso's brashness. With that said, the Elf turned and began walking at a steady pace.

Everyone, except for Alonso, followed him, meeting Calador stride for stride. Hesitating, Alonso said, "That's just rude," before jogging to catch up.

Calador didn't respond to Alonso's comment as he continued walking briskly in the direction of the two white towers that soared into the sky and marked the location of the distant Castle of Light.

"Are we going to the Castle of Light?" Danny asked, a smidgen of anxiety in his tone.

"Our destination lies within a part of the castle, yes."

"You promised me that you wouldn't involve the King of the Light," argued Danny.

"And so I shall not."

"Then why are we traveling to the castle?"

"There are those that reside within its high white walls other than the King of the Light, Squire Firoth."

Unsatisfied with the Elf's answer, knowing that he wouldn't receive a clearer response, Danny followed silently.

Calador led on, striking a path through the winding streets of the island before coming to stand before the white gates of the Castle of Light, two armored Knights of the Light, wearing gleaming suits of full plate mail, stood in a silent vigil.

"How are we going to get inside?" Matt asked.

"We are not going inside," said Calador, his head turning to the right, tilting up. "Our destination is the Western Spire."

Danny followed the Elf's gaze to the slender white tower that extended high into the sky, the distant tip obscured by a swirl of dark clouds.

"How are we supposed to get to it if we aren't entering the castle?" Doug asked.

"The Western Spire is not located within the boundaries of the castle walls," explained Calador, striding off to the left without waiting to see who followed him.

Everyone followed in pursuit, pacing equally behind him.

"The Western Spire is reserved for the Head Wizard of Light," Calador continued, once everyone had caught up. "Most Knights of the Light do not think very highly of those that delve into the realm of magic. Therefore, the reason the Western Spire is located beyond the walls of the Castle of Light is to signify this unrest."

"But magic is such an important part of the Light," observed Matt, adjusting his glasses. "Without it, the Light would be lost."

"The irony lies therein," said Calador. "Wizards tend to be quite political and often war with each other from within. From what I can understand, they constantly struggle among themselves for power and knowledge. For this very reason, many users of magic have turned to the Dark, or even the Grey. In my opinion, wizards often focus on the immediate gains of power promised to them. Unlike the Light, they refuse to see the long-term effects of their decisions. The Light sees them as haughty and, as such, only allows a certain number of wizards into the ranks at one time, requiring a full battery of tests designed to analyze their loyalty to the Light."

"So, do wizards have a place where they train, like us?" Matt asked.

"Yes, there are a few schools of wizardry scattered throughout the world, but that is another subject to be breached another time," said Calador, stopping at the base of the looming white tower.

Danny stood in awe of the structure in front of him, the sheer height of the tower extending well beyond the twisting black clouds created by the Eye.

Taking a single step forward, Calador moved within striking distance of the two pearly white doors that marked the entrance. Made from pure ivory, the doors portrayed twin dragons with red rubies for eyes.

Danny mimicked the Elf's movements and started to move forward, only to be stopped by Calador's outstretched hand.

"Wait!" ordered Calador, his voice stern as if in warning.

Danny stopped mid-step, taken aback by the authority in the Elf's voice. However, his shock only lingered on Calador for a split-second as the dragons carved upon the doors of the tower began to move. Their long, snake-like bodies uncoiled, swirling across the ivory door as if it was made of liquid.

"What's happening?" Doug asked, taking a few steps back.

"Quiet," said Calador in an even tone as he held his ground.

Completely uncoiled, the twin dragons broke free from their prison of ivory and slithered into the open air above as their tails lingered behind, still connected to the doorway.

"What..." began the dragon on the right.

"...business do you have," continued the dragon on the left.

"...here?" the dragon on the right finished.

Their voices were gritty and deep.

"I am Calador Varackice Con Dillion, and those behind me are Squires of the Light. We seek an audience with Alamber Ordvack Halfelvin, Head Wizard of the Light."

"Wait..." said the white dragon on the right.

"...here," finished the twin on the left.

With a flash of its ruby eyes, the dragon on the right slithered back into the door and disappeared from sight, leaving the ivory surface void of any trace that it had once held the intricate carving of a dragon. Lingered overhead, the dragon on the left waited, peering down curiously upon the gathered group.

"What was that about?" Matt asked, half in fear and half-in awe of the ivory dragon above him, as he adjusted his glasses for a better look.

"The Light uses knights to guard their doors, wizards use magic," explained Calador. "The dragon you see above you is simply the guardian of this tower."

"Epic," said Matt, taking a single step forward, which caused the dragon's red, glittering eyes to focus down upon him. Uncomfortable with the dragon's attention, Matt took two steps back.

Moments later, the other dragon appeared from within the confines of the door and slithered out to mimic the position of its twin.

"Head Wizard Alamber Ordvack Halfelvin..." began the newly-returned dragon.

"...bids you all welcome," continued the dragon on the left.

"...and summons you to his quarters," finished the dragon on the right.

Both dragons melded back into the doors, followed by a click as both doors swung open to reveal a path of pure white light.

"Come," Calador said without hesitation as he stepped through the portal of light and disappeared from sight.

Briza was next as she moved forward with Doug in tow.

"Wait," argued Doug. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Trust me," Briza said with a sweeping smile, her fine features beautifully accented by the soft light of the doorway.

Instantly assured, Doug allowed Briza to pull him through the portal, both disappeared.

"Elves," was all Alonso had to say on the subject as he proceeded into the light.

Anthony simply shrugged as he followed behind.

"This place is so much better than the church camp my mom usually forces me to go to," said Matt, stepping forward, stopping within touching distance of the glowing doorway. Right and outstretched, he placed his palm deep within the light. "It tingles," he said with a giddy grin. Then, without a second thought, he stepped through, disappearing in a flash.

Danny peered at Chris, who returned the look. "...After you, Squire Greene."

"No, by all means, after you, Squire Firoth," said Chris.

Both hesitated for a moment. "Together," they said in unison. After chuckling, they both walked up to the edge of the glimmering gateway and stepped through.

Danny felt his entire body take flight for an instant as the flash of light engulfed him. He felt weightless, as if in a free-fall. The surface of his skin tingled, causing goose bumps to shiver down his spine. Then he felt solid stone beneath his feet as he stepped out of the light and into a vast circular room.

Bookshelves lined the curved walls on both sides of him, stained dark red and filled to the brim with old and new tomes. On the opposite side of the room was a steep, winding set of stairs that led up to what Danny could only guess was a second level. A single square window seemed to be the only visible exit to the outside.

In the middle of the room sat two wine-red couches facing each other, with a long table between and a scorched brown rug providing comfort from the stone

beneath it. Placed upon the table was a silver platter containing a tall ceramic pitcher with steam rising from the contents within, a collection of cups and saucers surrounded it.

Calador and Alamber stood just off to the side of the couches, embraced in a shake of the forearm.

"Tis good to see you again, my old friend," said Alamber, wearing an orange robe accented with white underclothes and a yellow sash.

"We're on the top level," said Matt as he peered out the window, uninterested in the exchange between the two Elves.

"Technically, the top of the tower contains my personal chambers, which are up those stairs," corrected Alamber, gesturing to the twisting staircase behind him.

"But we were just at the base. How could we be at the top without going up any stairs?"

"Tis the convenience of magic, my young squire," said Alamber with a smile, the folds of his scarred face pulling the skin taut across his cheek.

"How'd you get those scars?" Alonso asked, pointing out the obvious, without the slightest thought of disrespect.

"That is a bit rude," interrupted Calador.

Alamber stretched out his right hand in a peaceful gesture. "No, it is quite all right. Do you mean these scars?" Alamber questioned, pointing to the four jagged marks that ran from just above his left eyebrow down to his jaw.

"Yes," said Alonso, oblivious to the rising discomfort of those around him.

"Twas a freak-quill sharpening accident, I am afraid," said Alamber with a half-smile.

Everyone responded with a light chuckle at the jest, except for Alonso, he sneered with a sarcastic smile.

"Now that we have that out of the way," continued Alamber without missing a beat, "shall we discuss the reason you have brought these first-years to my quarters, Calador?"

Calador gestured toward Danny. "I am afraid that rests with Squire Firoth."

Danny felt self-conscious as Alamber's one good eye focused on him with a curious gleam.

"Please, be seated and make yourselves comfortable," said Alamber, as if sensing Danny's distress. Taking the initiative, the Half-Elf gathered his robes about him and sat down. "Please," he added, motioning toward the opposite couch.

Danny took a seated position directly opposite. Chris followed next and sat down on Danny's right side, while Matt seated himself on the left. Doug and Briza found spots on the far-right side of the long couch, content to sit next to each other. Calador and Anthony felt more comfortable standing, while Alonso

wandered around the room, snooping through the curious collection of wizardly trinkets.

"Would you all care for some tea?" Alamber asked once everyone appeared settled.

"Please," said Briza politely, while everyone else simply nodded.

Alamber went to work instantly, leaning forward and gripping the white pitcher. Taking the matching cups in turn, he poured out the green-colored contents of the pitcher, causing steady tendrils of steam to hover through the air.

"Thank you," offered Danny as he received the warm cup. Peering into the hot liquid, he noted the greenish color as well as several black specks floating within.

"'Tis only the spice, Squire," said Alamber, noting Danny's reluctance.

Danny leaned forward and reached out for a small ceramic bowl containing a mound of sugar.

"Are you not brave enough to try it without adding other ingredients?" Alamber asked.

"It is rude according to my race to not accept the offer of tea as it has been brewed first," added Calador.

"I'm sorry..." began Danny.

"Please," Alamber insisted, holding his right hand before him in a gesture of peace. "Due to my lineage, I merely contain half the manners of my race, so I will not be offended. I only intercede to save you from making a mistake in the future, should you find yourselves in the company of more civil Elves. Please, at least try it as is first."

Seeing no harm in the attempt, Danny took a small sip. The initial sensation he had from the liquid was that it was hot, but not overly so. The second was an overwhelming taste of mint, followed by a small tang of cinnamon. Gulping the tea down, Danny produced a smile. "It's very good!" he said, leaning back into the couch, content to leave the sugar out of the concoction.

"I am glad you think so, Squire," said Alamber, shifting back in his seat, as if to mimic Danny's posture. "'Tis my own creation, you see. My Elvin brethren often proclaim that it is much too sweet, while my Human counterparts seem to truly enjoy it."

"I like it," said Briza after taking a sip. "But Father would not."

Alamber nodded with approval. "Most young Elves favor my teas, while the elders of the race tend to be stuck in their ways. The teas of the Elves tend to be quite plain, relying on tree bark and grass to flavor them. What say you, Calador?"

"You know I have always favored your brews," said Calador after taking his third sip.

"That is because a visit to Elsmelda is long overdue, Calador. I am sure that, once there, your tastes will revert back to the bland preferences of your kin."

"I am more than satisfied with my current surroundings, Alamber."

"You see," began Alamber, addressing his words to everyone, "Calador has not returned home since..."

"That is enough, Alamber," interrupted Calador, his voice loud and commanding. "That is not the reason we are here."

"In any case," continued Alamber as if quite used to Calador's tantrums, "should any of you ever visit the capital city of the Elves, I would definitely recommend adding some sugar to the teas you will be offered. That is, of course, after you taste it in the manner it was presented and assuming you can even find any sugar."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Danny, gulping down the rest of the balmy liquid.

"More?" Alamber asked.

"Please," Danny said, offering up his empty cup.

"You were about to tell me the reason for this visit, yes?" encouraged Alamber, retrieving the alabaster pitcher, pouring Danny a second helping.

After taking a quick sip to settle his nerves, Danny began his tale, starting with his initial meeting with Sabrina Drake and his introduction to Sir Syndil on the day of his testing.

Alamber listened intently, encouraging Danny with subtle nods.

Taking another swig, Danny continued, detailing his duels with Squire Rigil and Calador, and the discussion with the blind Elf afterward.

"Mageknight," Alamber whispered to himself, his eye bulging as if it searched Danny up and down for some clue to the truth. "Do you believe he is the one?" he asked of Calador.

"I do," insisted Calador, with a slight nod of the head.

Alamber inched forward, "I have so many questions."

"I am afraid they will have to wait," said Calador.

"There is more?" Alamber asked, looking confused.

"There is," assured Calador.

Danny continued, explaining their suspicions about Sir Syndil.

Alamber continued to listen intently. However, once Danny had finished, he said, "'Tis true that Sir Syndil and Calador have never seen eye to eye, but why would Sir Syndil keep such a glorious discovery to himself?"

"That is what we are trying to figure out, Professor Alamber," said Briza.

"Why come to me? What can I do?"

"I found an object in Sir Syndil's personal quarters."

"...An object?" Alamber scooted right to the edge of his seat. "What do you mean, you found it?"

"I snuck in while Sir Syndil was away."

"You did what!" Alamber said, turning his gaze toward Calador. "You knew about this?" he asked the Elf.

Calador remained calm, standing straight and rigid. "I did not know of their intention at the time. Had I known, I would have put a stop to it immediately."

Alamber took to his feet. "Such action is grounds for suspension from the Academy."

"At least listen to the discovery before you pass judgment, my old friend."

Glaring at Calador for but a moment longer, Alamber shook his head in shame before turning the stern gaze of his lone eye upon Danny. "Continue," he said matter-of-factly.

Danny hesitated for a moment, unsure of the interaction between the two Elves.

"What did you find?" Alamber asked, his tone remaining stern, but growing softer.

Danny's hand shook, causing the teacup to rattle on the saucer as he placed it on the table. He went on to describe the events of his trespass. He explained the open book that detailed the known facts of the Mageknight and then the vision of the Ghostsight.

Alamber's eye widened as Danny clarified the event, the Half-Elf clearly enthralled by the telling.

Danny explained how his vision had led him to the secret switch and the trap door in the middle of the floor and, finally, the objects within.

With his anger forgotten, Alamber fell back into the cushions of the couch, stroking the fine red hairs of his goatee, whispering the description of the black orb repeatedly to himself.

"Do you know what the object is?" Calador asked after a moment.

Pulled from his pondering, Alamber looked at the blind Elf as if he was seeing him for the first time. "Honestly, it could be any number of things, truthfully, I am not quite sure. Have you searched the archives for a description?"

"In painstaking detail, Professor Alamber," said Briza.

"What a waste of time that was," added Alonso.

"...Calador?" Alamber asked.

"I would not have involved you in this had I not already exhausted every other resource, old friend."

Danny shifted forward to the edge of his seat. "We were hoping you might be able to search the archives at Elsmelda."

Alamber resumed caressing the deep red hair of his chin. "Aye, their archives date back much farther than those of the Light. Perhaps one of the elders may have more knowledge about this orb of which you speak."

"Then you'll go to Elsmelda on our behalf?" Matt asked as his glasses drooped down the bridge of his nose, giving him a rather comical appearance.

"Truly, with the finals for the Chalice of Light beginning in the coming week, my scholarly obligations here are complete. I have been contemplating a visit to the capital anyway. It seems you have given me a valid reason."

"Thank you," said Danny.

"However," interrupted Alamber, "you must understand, Mageknight, that the information you have passed on to me is rather critical to the Light. Our forces are at an all-time low and your arrival has been preordained to turn the tide in our favor."

Danny felt self-conscious as all eyes turned upon him.

Alamber hesitated, sensing Danny's distress. "Should I succeed in uncovering the truth about this dark object, as well as the motivation behind Sir Syndil's deception, I need your word that you will take your rightful place as the Mageknight."

"You have my word, Professor Alamber."

Alamber sighed. "Then, it is decided. I shall leave on the morrow for Elsmelda, the capital city of the Elves."

32

Sir Syndil's Final Lesson

A week had passed since Head Wizard Alamber had left for the capital of the Elves. For Danny, the past few days had seemed somewhat normal; he focused on training and attending the various classes of a squire. However, every once in a while, he worried about the news the Half-Elf might bring back when he did return.

This particular evening found Danny preparing himself for his final lesson with Sir Syndil. Despite his concern over the Elf's intentions, he was looking forward to the training session; Sir Syndil had helped Danny to nearly master a portion of the Ghostsight.

"If you don't trust that Elf, why do you keep training with him?" Alonso asked bluntly from across the room, while lying on his bed with his arms crossed behind his head.

Danny slipped his sword belt around his waist. "It's because I don't trust him that I train with him. The more time I spend around him, the more I might learn. Besides, if I refused his training, he might suspect something was wrong."

Alonso shrugged. "If I were you, I would've walked right up to the Pool of the Mageknight long ago, claimed what belonged to me and shoved it in Sir Syndil's face. I bet the Bonded of a Mageknight is much better than the blades we carry now."

"Things are already complicated without everyone celebrating the fact that I may be the Mageknight. And I like my sword well enough," said Danny, slipping his longsword into the sheath with a slight ring.

Alonso shrugged for the second time and added, "Whatever."

"Just ignore him, man," encouraged Chris. "Are you sure you want to do this? Our training as first-years is complete, as you know. You have no obligation to see Sir Syndil."

"I know. I really believe this is something I have to do."

"Do you want us to come with you?"

"No, all of you have done more than I could have asked of you. It means more to me than you'll ever know," expressed Danny, gazing at each one to make the point. "This is something I must do on my own." With one final smile, Danny exited the room, adding, "Enjoy your evening."

At the double doors that marked the exit to the first-year barracks, he found Calador waiting with his arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

"Your final lesson with Sir Syndil?" the Elf asked, even though Danny knew for sure that the blind Elf already knew the answer.

"...My final lesson."

Calador uncrossed his arms and took a step forward. "I know I do not need to tell you to be careful."

"If I've learned anything these past few weeks, it's to be cautious."

Reaching out, Calador placed a stern hand on Danny's left shoulder. "Be very careful," he said before moving past.

"I will," said Danny to Calador's back, certain that the Elf had heard him. With that, he exited into the cool night air, the breeze from the surrounding ocean carrying a salty smell. Alone, he traversed Army Avenue, making note as squires from various armies celebrated the end of the academic year, every army except for Dragon and Lion; they were both scheduled to compete for the Chalice of Light on the morrow, marking the true end to the training year.

Cheers and hoots surrounded him as he passed through a kaleidoscope of colors created by the dyed robes of each individual army. Passing the barracks of Dragon Army, Danny felt a desperate need to tell Sabrina the truth, but he didn't. Not that he *could* anyway, most likely Dragon Army was engaged in some last minute training before the final battle against Lion Army.

Before he knew it, Danny stood outside the doors that marked the training facility supervised by Sir Syndil. Taking a deep breath, he lifted his hand to

knock. Before his knuckle could even contact the surface, the door swung open, revealing Sir Syndil and his ever-present smile.

Suddenly, a high-pitched tone marked the first of ten bells.

"Squire Firoth," greeted Sir Syndil, "right on time. Please, do come in." Stepping to the side, he gestured for Danny to enter as the smile widened upon his face.

Danny forced himself to obey, the familiar smell of sweat and steel greeted him as he stepped into the large room.

"This marks our last session together, Danny," said Sir Syndil, as he closed the door. The door shut with a loud click, as if to enhance the finality of his words.

"I'd like to thank you for all of your help," said Danny sincerely. "Truly, without it, I could never have mastered my ability."

"So, you think you have mastered it, do you?" Sir Syndil asked, taking a few steps forward and stopping within arm's reach.

Danny turned away from the Elf and entered the dueling circle. He felt uncomfortable in such close proximity to Sir Syndil in lieu of recent events.

"I can nearly hold the..." Danny stopped himself; he had almost referred to the named ability of the Mageknight. "Ability," he corrected with a quick turn of the tongue, "for a full day."

"Is that the full extent of your power?"

Caught off-guard by the question, Danny looked down and found himself at the center of the dueling circle, the stone marking Sir Syndil's secret hiding place just beneath his feet. "I don't know," he said, fighting to keep his tone even.

"Nor do I," imparted Sir Syndil, taking a step forward. "However, I have always found that the best way to find out where one will end up is to test him or her to find out their current level of expertise." At that, his right hand slipped over the silver hilt of the Bonded at his side and pulled the slender blade free.

The Ghostsight had become nearly second nature to Danny. He focused his breathing, causing the familiar apparition of Sir Syndil's future actions to take a noticeable form. This was the first time he'd ever seen Sir Syndil draw his Bonded; Danny was frightened as he slowly moved his hand down to the hilt of his own blade.

Sir Syndil moved in slow increments as he gracefully twisted his Bonded back and forth within his hand, *the ghostly image created by the Mageknight's ability showed nothing more than a soft silhouette.*

"Do not be afraid, Squire Firoth," he said, reading Danny's reaction. "We have dueled countless times and I only wish to see the extent of your progress."

"This is the first time you've ever drawn your Bonded," said Danny, taking two steps in retreat, tightening his grip around the sword at his side. His knuckles turned bone-white as he prepared to free it from the sheath.

Sir Syndil presented his Bonded before him, the slick steel of the blade catching the light and reflecting it in a brilliant rainbow of colors. A collection of runes, in a language Danny couldn't understand, was inscribed over the length of the ornate brand, from tip to hilt. However, Danny found its beauty easily interpreted.

"The name of my Bonded is Kryssagrim, and I present it as an honor to your hard work over the past few months. I propose one last duel between us to measure the extent of your progress. As you have not yet gained the privilege of a Bonded, I shall not use any of Kryssagrim's Awakenings."

Although Sir Syndil seemed sincere, Danny never relaxed his grip. "I accept," Danny said, with more confidence than he felt as he pulled his own sword free with the familiar singing of steel.

Sir Syndil's ghost flowed elegantly in a salute and then melded into an offensive stance, the Elf following in the exact movement a few moments later. "For the honor of the Light," added the Elf.

Danny returned the honor with a twist of his wrist, causing the naked steel of his blade to linger evenly between his eyes before swiping to the side. "For the Light," he said, stepping back into a defensive position.

"Are you prepared?" Sir Syndil asked.

"Are you?" Danny said in jest. He took one final breath to focus his mind, becoming somewhat excited. Despite Sir Syndil's newly discovered deception, Danny had come to relish his bouts with the techniques professor. In many ways, he looked up to the Elf as a mentor. Caught between conflicting feelings of betrayal and fondness for the Elf, Danny found himself quite confused.

Sir Syndil responded with a smile, reassuring the bond that had formed between them over the past few months. *Seconds later, his ghost surged forward with the blade leveled to the right in an upward attack.* Sir Syndil followed directly behind.

Anticipating the attack, Danny planted his right foot behind him, stepping back just at the last second, allowing Sir Syndil's attack to glide past his upper chest by mere inches. Danny felt the swift breeze of the blade as it passed before him. Believing that Sir Syndil had left himself exposed, Danny followed with an attack of his own, leveling his sword in a quick swipe.

However, the cunning instructor recovered faster than Danny had expected, and Sir Syndil's shining silver brand appeared out of nowhere, the swords meeting with a loud clang.

Eye to eye, knight and squire lingered a moment before Sir Syndil smiled and spun to the right, angling a low attack.

With the help of the Ghostsight, Danny anticipated the move.

This simple sparring went on for a few minutes as both got into a rhythm of blocks and blows. Then, just as quickly as he'd begun, Sir Syndil retreated, ending in a defensive stance just beyond Danny's striking distance.

"Good," said the Elf. "I believe I am thoroughly warmed up. Are you ready for the true bout?"

Danny couldn't help but return the Elf's smile as he stretched a tight muscle in his right shoulder. Testing the weight of his sword in his hand, he twirled it with a twist of his wrist and readied himself in a defensive stance. "Ready when you are."

Sir Syndil sprang forward, *his speed almost matching the ghost that predicted his movements.*

Expecting the move, he'd dueled with Sir Syndil now more times than he could remember, Danny stepped to the side and parried his opponent's attack downward. However, just as he felt the pressure of the blades making contact, Danny felt as if he was pushing down nothing but air. Then, in his peripheral vision, *he glimpsed a ghostly light.*

Moving instinctively, he brought his blade up to block. A forceful clang ensued as Sir Syndil's attack threatened to push Danny off his feet. Taking a few steps in retreat, Danny recovered as Sir Syndil pressed his advantage, the once-present smile upon the Elf's face reduced to an expression of surprising seriousness.

Sir Syndil came at him with a flurry of attacks, *his movements coinciding with the ghost that predicted his advances.*

Without the advantage of foresight, Sir Syndil forced Danny to fight merely with the instinct learned from the training he'd undergone over the past few months. However, what scared him the most was the grave look upon Sir Syndil's face. It was the first time he'd ever seen the Elf with such an expression, frankly, it frightened him.

Sir Syndil, as if unaware of Danny's fear, fought on with a frenzy of blade work, his attacks growing in a smooth flow of speed and strength.

It was no contest as Danny battled on a purely defensive level.

"Enough!" he yelled, rolling to the right in an attempt to put some distance between him and the crazed Elf. Holding his left hand pleadingly out in front of him, he requested a respite.

Sir Syndil didn't even blink as he turned on Danny, his face a mask of grim conviction. "Is this the extent of your ability?" he asked, twirling Kryssagrim with a blinding speed. However, he left no time for an answer as he surged forward, his Bonded leading the way in a sideways swipe that looked more like a streak of light than solid steel.

Danny barely dodged to the right, parrying the deadly attack away, watching as Kryssagrim passed within inches of his eyes. It was no mere practice blade

that Sir Syndil wielded and Danny knew that, should even the faintest attack find its mark, he would take the full brunt of the blade. He wore no armor, only the white robes of a first-year squire. Panicking, Danny danced around the dueling circle, desperate to put as much distance from Sir Syndil as he could.

"Please, stop!"

Sir Syndil's eyes bulged with focus as he pressed the attack. "Show me your true power!"

Danny's concentration left him, the Ghostsight vanished from his vision. His muscles began to burn as his blade became heavy in his hands and his breathing quickened.

Still, Sir Syndil came at him. "Show me more!" the Elf yelled, angling Kryssagrim in a sideways lunge.

Danny limply parried attack after attack, his body failing as he reached his limit.

"There must be more!" Sir Syndil said, taking a quick step forward, twisting Kryssagrim with a flick of his wrist. The blinding sword danced in the light before carving a direct line through the air with a whistle.

With the last bit of strength left within him, Danny brought his blade to bear with two hands. The swords met with a resounding clang, the force nearly knocking Danny off his feet. His grip faltered, causing the sword to slip through his fingers, tumble end over end and embed itself in the brick beside him at a slight angle.

Sir Syndil didn't stop there, he reversed the attack and leveled Kryssagrim for a follow-up.

A ray of light passed within inches of Danny's neck as he fell backward, barely avoiding the tip of Sir Syndil's Bonded. Catching himself with both hands, Danny watched in sheer horror as Sir Syndil took a single step forward and raised Kryssagrim for the final blow, his eyes filled with determination.

Danny suddenly wished he'd listened to his friends. He regretted not being more honest with Sabrina. Wide-eyed, he found himself mesmerized by the speed and beauty of Kryssagrim. Defenseless, Danny closed his eyes to the brilliant light of the blade as it approached him, awaiting the inevitable.

However, the attack never came. Inching his eyes open, Danny discovered the silver sword at a standstill, leveled between his eyes. Looking up, he noticed that the smile had returned to Sir Syndil's face. Letting out a held breath, Danny said, "I thought . . . you were going to kill me."

"There is no need, Squire Firoth," said Sir Syndil, reclaiming his composure as he slipped Kryssagrim back into the sheath and offered Danny his right hand.

Danny hesitated.

"I offer you no harm, Danny."

Somewhat assured, Danny reached up, took Sir Syndil's hand in his own and hauled himself up. "What do you mean, there's no need?"

Sir Syndil's smile widened. "It is simply a manner of speech. I could have killed you if I so desired, but there was no need."

The explanation did nothing to comfort Danny as he retrieved his sword from the stone and hesitated before returning it to the scabbard. "You almost killed me," he said, turning on his instructor, his right hand refusing to leave the hilt of his sword.

"I apologize if I frightened you, Squire Firoth," said Sir Syndil, both of his arms outstretched in a sign of innocence. "That was never my intent."

"Then what was your intent?"

"Simply to measure the extent of your progress, you see. I needed to know the limits of your ability and now I can safely assume that you have reached the limited best of your training for this semester."

Danny's hand relaxed ever-so-slightly, it still remained fixed upon the pommel of his blade. "What else do you think I, with my ability, am capable of?"

"Truly, I am not exactly sure, thus the reason for our duel. However, I think I have learned enough from our sessions together to plan for next year, as well as the years to come."

"Plan for what?"

Sir Syndil took a few steps forward, standing just within touching distance.

Danny tensed, his right hand squeezing the hilt of his sword hard enough to turn his knuckles white.

"I give you my word, Squire Firoth, that I offer no aggression towards you this day or the following," said Sir Syndil, his arm outstretched in an offering of peace.

Danny visibly relaxed as the Elf's left hand lingered in the air, just before settling upon his right shoulder.

Sir Syndil's smile widened to impossible lengths, appearing fake and forced. Danny wondered why he'd never noticed just how phony the Elf's smile seemed, yet he was unable to process the thought fully as Sir Syndil began to speak.

"Tomorrow is the final duel between Dragon Army and Lion Army. They compete for the Chalice of Light. This marks the end of training for this year. For some, the life of a Knight of the Light awaits them. You, as well as others, must decide whether you will continue to pursue the path of a knight or return to your old life. In any case, you have progressed a great deal since your arrival and I can truly say that I have nothing else to teach you this year." With a slight squeeze of Danny's shoulder, Sir Syndil released his grasp. "Go, Squire Firoth, and rest. You have earned it. On the morrow, you will witness firsthand what

it is to be a Squire of the Light. Should you choose to continue your training, you will find yourself placed within the ranks of an army next year."

Danny was confused as Sir Syndil ushered him toward the exit. For all the time and effort the Elf had spent in order to gain Danny's trust, he never expected to be let loose so easily.

"I look forward to seeing your progress in the years to come, Squire Firoth, should you decide to continue the path of a Knight of the Light," Sir Syndil said, as he led Danny to the door and opened it.

"Thank you, Sir Syndil."

"No, Danny, thank you," said the Elf, his smile almost appearing genuine.

Danny stepped clear as Sir Syndil closed the door softly behind him. Standing in the cool night air, Danny's confusion remained. However, more than anything else, he felt an overwhelming sense of dread. He had the feeling like he'd just failed a very important test.



Betrayal

Danny woke up to the first ringing of the seventeenth bell. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he stepped, bare-footed, onto the cool stone floor. He knew that he didn't have to be up for another hour but he knew he would be unable to go back to sleep; his training had conditioned him to waking at this time. Besides, jumbled thoughts and feelings still haunted him from the night before, his encounter with Sir Syndil had unnerved him.

Chris stirred, sat up and nodded in Danny's direction.

Danny filled him in, giving Chris every confusing detail about his last training session with Sir Syndil. While he was telling Chris the story, his friends began to wake up as well.

"Why can't I go back to sleep," groaned Doug, shifting in the sheets.

By the time the final toll of the seventeenth bell had come and gone, everyone, except for Matt, appeared to be wide-awake.

"Somebody, please wake Matt up," Alonso groaned, as he rubbed his eyes. "If I have to be awake, so does he."

Anthony shrugged and moved over to the edge of Matt's bed. Gripping the side of the mattress, he lifted it upward, overturning both bed and boy, spilling him somewhere beneath in a mound of sheets and blankets.

"What the... what's happening," mumbled Matt from somewhere beneath the heap, causing laughter to erupt from those in the room. The pile of sheets shifted as Matt peeked through, pushing the mattress aside. Still half-asleep, he wiped his eyes, slipped his glasses over his face and reached for his sword. Pulling the blade halfway out, he said, "Who's the newb that did it?"

Everyone pointed accusing fingers at Anthony. Matt followed their gestures and turned an angry eye toward the larger boy.

Anthony stood up straight as if he couldn't care less being the target of Matt's anger. Still dressed in the thin white fabric of his sleeping robes, his massive chest and sizable biceps stretched the cloth taut across his muscular build.

"You guys are such newbs," said Matt, thinking it best that he not confront Anthony as he slipped his sword back into the scabbard.

A resounding fit of laughter ensued in Matt's honor.

All Matt could do was shake his head as he went to work gathering the sheets and straightening his bedding. "Newbs," was all he managed to say in his own defense.

After a good laugh, Danny felt better. It had been some time since he was able to feel free enough to do that, to laugh.

"I'm hungry," said Anthony, a fact that never seemed to amaze anyone.

"Breakfast does sound good right now," agreed Danny.

With that, everyone seemed to agree as they made their way down to the main hall. Finding a long table, they sat down next to the huge fireplace at the far end of the hall. The flames were fresh and toiling, licking the bark of newly-placed wood. A feast awaited them, food stacked high on the table. Anthony filled his plate and then his mouth. Chris followed him, as did the others. A few minutes later, Briza joined the group, finding a seat next to Doug.

"Morning," Doug greeted her, his voice somewhat muffled from the muffin in his mouth.

"If you ever visit Elsmelda, your manners are going to have to improve most drastically," said the she Elf.

Doug swallowed hard, embarrassed.

"Whipped already," said Matt, before finishing off a forkful of eggs.

"What does he mean by whipped?" Briza asked, unfamiliar with the Human expression.

"He is suggesting that, because we've become close, I'm sort of your slave," explained Doug.

"My race does not allow slavery!" Briza said, taking to her feet, motioning toward the hilt of her sword.

Matt allowed himself a slight chuckle as he held his hands before him in a sign of peace. "For living such a long time, you Elves really aren't that bright."

"She hasn't had very much experience interacting with Humans," Doug told him, placing a reassuring hand over Briza's and navigating her away from the sword at her side.

"What does he mean, clarify?" Briza asked, now confused more than angered.

"He's just being stupid, I'll explain later," said Doug before turning on Matt. "Most Elves will never set foot beyond the boundaries of their own borders and are not familiar with Human slang."

"Good to know," said Matt, adjusting his glasses, shrugging.

"Should I be informed that you have slighted me, Squire Mickler, I shall uphold my honor with my blade," said Briza.

"Truly, I meant no offense," Matt said, now a little concerned. "Tell her, Doug."

"I'll explain it to her like you meant it. How she interprets it is completely up to her."

"Speaking of my race, how did your last session with Sir Syndil fare, Squire Firoth?" Briza asked Danny.

Danny suddenly realized that it had been very late when he returned to the barracks the night before. He realized that Briza had yet to hear the tale. However, still somewhat confused by what had transpired, Danny felt more than comfortable recounting the details, if not for Briza, then for his own understanding.

"We dueled," began Danny, "and Sir Syndil tested my progress to the point that I thought he might actually kill me. Yet, I have a feeling that he discovered whatever it was that he sought as far as my... ability is concerned."

"Perhaps, he merely wanted to challenge the Mageknight," said Briza. "Sir Syndil's legendary ability with the blade is always the talk of Elsmelda. A good swordsman strives to pit themselves against stronger opponents, hoping the one to follow will be more skilled than the previous opponent. Maybe, he wanted to face the legend of the Mageknight in order to prove something to himself."

"Perhaps," said Danny, more for everyone else than himself, he still had his doubts.

"What'll you do now, man, knowing that Sir Syndil doesn't have some evil plan in store for you?" Chris asked.

"I don't know."

"Are you going to make yourself known to the King of the Light?" Doug asked.

"I don't think I have much of a choice there. Calador told me that when this was over, he'd see to it firsthand that I did just that."

"You're going to be famous," said Anthony.

"Just don't forget about us, man," joked Chris, thudding his fist lightly against Danny's right shoulder.

Danny's tone turned serious. "I'll still be me. Being the Mageknight won't change who I am. Besides, I still have to pass the true test. The Bonded blade of the Mageknight still remains at the bottom of its resting pool. If you remember, I failed to pull it from the water, just as you did."

"That's true," agreed Alonso. "For all you newbs know, I might be the Mageknight. I think I'll give it another shot. Maybe I'll be able to pull the sword out on my second try."

"Still," interrupted Danny before Alonso could continue any further, "Alamber has yet to return from Elsmelda."

"And there is no word from the magician as of yet," said Calador from the end of the table. All eyes turned to the Elf, shocked that they hadn't heard his approach.

"That's rather rude of you," pointed out Alonso.

"I made no attempt to hide my movements, Squire Martinez," said Calador, standing rigidly.

"Maybe he's been unable to find anything," said Matt.

"That is one of many possibilities, Squire Mickler. Yet, I keep coming back to what you just said about your last lesson with Sir Syndil," the Elf said, turning in Danny's direction, as if to address him alone. "It would be unlike Sir Syndil to give up so easily. However, from what you have told everyone here, you feel as if he has done just that."

"No," said Danny, shaking his head, "I said that it felt like he found what he was searching for. Whatever he wanted from me, I think he found it."

"Forgive me, Squire Firoth, but it does not add up."

Danny felt annoyed. He was beginning to feel that Calador had been manipulating him from the beginning in order to turn him against Sir Syndil. He stood up. At this point, he didn't know whom to believe anymore.

"Are you sure that you're not reading more into this than you should be? That your personal grudge against Sir Syndil isn't clouding your judgment?"

"I told you, from the beginning, that my personal feelings toward Sir Syndil had nothing to do with my involvement in your safety," said Calador, his mood unchanging even in light of Danny's obvious frustration. "My duty as your caretaker is to see to your well-being, by any means necessary. You must forgive me if I refuse to fall short of my responsibility; I believe that this business with Sir Syndil has not yet come to its full fruition."

"Enough!" Danny said, more forcibly than he meant to, causing the majority of those gathered within the hall to turn in his direction. "Enough," he said again, this time in a softer tone. Taking a deep breath, Danny turned away from the table. "I need some fresh air," he said, walking toward the double doors that marked the exit to the first-year barracks.

"Wait up, man."

Danny turned on his friend and held up his hand, palm out. "...Alone."

Chris stopped dead in his tracks, his face wrought with confusion.

Seeing the hurt in his friend's eyes, Danny felt the need to explain. "Thank you, everyone, for your friendship," he said, addressing everyone seated at the table, "but this is my burden. The final duel between Lion Army and Dragon Army begins in about an hour. Save me a seat."

With that, Danny faked a smile and strode off toward the doors, alone as he wished.

Stepping outside, Danny took in a deep whiff as the salty sea air invaded his nostrils, carried on the wings of a soft breeze. Walking forward, he made his way past the barracks of Griffin Army and Horse Army. Some squires lingered outside, getting ready to leave early in order to get a good seat for the final duel. He paid them no heed and walked on. He intended to wish Sabrina luck before she left, however, stopping before the towering construct of the Dragon Army barracks, he figured that he probably wouldn't find her. Without knocking, he knew that no one would answer, the building looked vacant. Dragon Army was in the running to win the Chalice of Light for the third year in a row. There was no doubt that they were preparing in the Great Dome while he stood there.

Danny regretted not telling Sabrina the truth and he knew that if he could turn back time and tell her what he should have, he would. Feeling very alone, he turned down the small alleyway that separated Dragon Army and Rat Army. With no particular destination in mind, he simply walked, allowing his mind to roam completely free, something that had been far beyond him the past few weeks. He walked, not keeping track of time, comfortable in the release it allowed.

Turning a corner, a strong tone announced the first of sixteen bells. Danny panicked, the final duel would begin any minute and he would be late. However, before he could put his legs to good use, he almost gasped as he spotted a flash of orange robes combined with a yellow sash and flowing red hair. Then, just as quick as he'd appeared, the man vanished in a blur of motion, blocked by a high brick wall.

"Alamber," whispered Danny, he quickened his step into an all-out sprint.

Alamber seemed to be heading for the Castle of Light.

"...Alamber!" Danny yelled, as he rounded the stone corner.

A good distance away, a confused Alamber turned with an expression of utter surprise. Perhaps the last person the Half-Elf had thought to encounter was Danny Firoth. Alamber's eyes darted in every conceivable direction. He had the appearance of concern and purpose. Once sure that no one else might surprise him, he motioned Danny over with a wave of the arm.

Speeding up, Danny covered the distance, coming to a sudden stop. "Alamber," he said, his tone rising in question.

"Hush, Squire," said Alamber, holding a finger in front of his lips. "The Dark has a presence here. However, I know not the strength of it yet."

"What are you..." began Danny, he was interrupted as Alamber gripped the cloth covering his neck and hauled him into the nearest alley.

"Be silent, Squire," encouraged Alamber for the second time, as he scanned the immediate area.

Danny held his tongue.

"We are in grave danger," returning his attention back to Danny, once again sure that they were alone. "I must go to the King of the Light to present a warning, and you must get to a safer place. You must go now, go back to the first-year barracks, as quickly as you can." Releasing Danny, Alamber turned back the way he'd come. "Go, now!" he yelled, looking back for the briefest of seconds.

Danny hesitated. "Wait!" he yelled. "What did you discover in Elsmelda?"

Alamber stopped dead in his tracks; he took a deep breath before turning back toward Danny. "The orb you found in Syndil's possession was an ancient artifact used to communicate directly with the Shadow world. We have been betrayed, Danny and Syndil is the betrayer."

"Are you sure?"

"Books do not lie, Danny."

"But Sir Syndil has always been interested in researching Shadows, perhaps he was just examining it."

Alamber shook his head to indicate the opposite. "When you found it, the orb had been used shortly before. I know this because of your description of it. The swirling shades that you described within told me as much. If Syndil hadn't used the device just prior to finding it, the sphere would have appeared completely clear."

Danny shook his head, unable to believe what he was hearing. Sir Syndil had trained him and helped him to improve to a level that he would've never reached without him.

"Why do you defend him so, Danny?"

"I've trained with him individually ever since I arrived here. He helped me."

"He used you. If you are the Mageknight, you will be the sole contributor to the downfall of the Dark. It is written. It would only make sense that he focus his efforts on you if he is conspiring with the Shadows."

Danny suddenly found himself struggling to breathe. He'd never realized that Sir Syndil's betrayal could go so deep.

A distant roaring announced that the final duel between Dragon Army and Lion Army had begun.

"Of course," said Alamber, turning his attention in the direction of the Great Dome, "the duel for the Chalice of Light. Everyone's attention will be focused

on the duel." Alamber looked back toward Danny. "It is the perfect time for him to strike. Listen, we are all in grave danger, but you are perhaps in the most danger, Danny. Being the likely candidate to become the Mageknight, Syndil will probably target you."

"But Sir Syndil..."

"Stop calling him Sir. Syndil is no longer a Knight of the Light and should not be addressed by that honor. He has betrayed us all and he must be punished accordingly."

Before Danny could respond, a rapid clang of bells pierced the silence, the rhythm much faster than the usual canter of chimes that announced the hours of the day.

"What's that?" Danny asked, confused, the chime of the sixteenth bell had rung only minutes ago.

"We are undone... I am too late," said Alamber, his one good eye lost to the distance of the twin bell towers.

"What's happening?" Danny asked, raising his voice in an attempt to speak over the continuing clanging of the bells.

"That signal means that the island is under attack. Syndil has made his move."

"What should we do?"

Alamber swiveled back toward Danny. "...We? We will do nothing, Squire. I must see the king now and you will return to the first-year barracks until you are instructed otherwise. Is that clear?"

Danny hesitated.

"Is that clear, Squire?"

"Yes," Danny said, reluctantly.

"Promise me that you will do as you are ordered."

"I promise," Danny lied, yet again.

"Now go." With that, Alamber turned and disappeared around the corner in a dash.

Moving in the opposite direction, Danny picked up his step; the ringing of the alarm coincided with the increasing beat of his heart.

Now where to? he thought as he exited the alley between two large brick buildings.

Suddenly he heard, a loud bang that mimicked a thunderclap, it was coming from somewhere to his left, it shook the ground beneath his feet. Seconds later, a billowing plume of black smoke swirled into the air, marking the location of the carnage, it was near the middle of the island.

Without another thought, Danny picked up the pace. Over the past few months, his training had prepared him for just this situation, or so he thought. His legs moved at a steady tempo. With his right hand on the hilt of his sword,

he navigated the twisting turns of the city. However, nothing could've prepared him for what he would come across as he turned the corner.

He stopped dead in his tracks. Not three feet from him, a short, robust Dwarf lay, face-down and still, his fiery red hair in a tangled mess and his steel plate armor soiled with a mixture of dirt and blood.

Kneeling down, Danny grunted as he eased the old Dwarf onto his back, revealing a pair of blue eyes that looked weakly up at him. Danny recognized the Dwarf, it was Sir Bartlett Firebeard, Master of the Forge.

"Me... Bonded, lad," groaned the Forgemaster.

Danny scanned the area, he noticed the red glint of a hammer head indented halfway into the nearby stone. Leaving the Dwarf's side, he put both hands upon the handle but he pulled back as the flesh of his hands began to burn from the surprise heat that the silver pommel radiated.

Sir Bartlett allowed himself a low rumbling chuckle that turned into a fit of coughing. "'Tis hot, lad... use the sleeves of ya robes," he managed to say in between fits of pain.

Danny wrapped the thick fabric of his robes around his hands. Gripping the heft of the hammer a second time, he could still feel the heat emanating from beneath the covering. Giving it a quick tug, he discovered that the hammer was wedged deeper into the stone than he'd first anticipated.

"What happened?" he asked, bracing his foot against the rock, forcing the hammer free.

"...Twas Syndil, dat snake. Joined da Dark, he has," managed Sir Bartlett as he struggled to prop himself up on his elbows and scoot his back toward the wall of the nearby building.

Danny grunted, the hammer proved heavier than he'd thought possible. Grunting again, he hauled it to his shoulder and carried it to Sir Bartlett as he lay slumped against the stone.

"Give er here, lad," croaked the Dwarf.

Danny hesitated for a moment, wondering if the Dwarf could handle such a heavy object in his condition.

"Here," ordered Sir Bartlett again, raising his right hand to receive his Bonded.

Figuring he had little choice, Danny lowered the hammer to its master.

The Forgemaster took the hammer bare-handed, the heat of the handle was apparently of no consequence. Wielding the weighty weapon as he would a common twig, Sir Bartlett spun the hammer downward. The glowing red steel met the stone of the road, causing a series of scarlet sparks. Putting his weight upon the handle, he propped himself up and made ready to stand.

"I owe ya an apology, lad."

"Just . . . take it easy," said Danny, slipping a helping hand beneath the old Dwarf's arm to help him up.

"I could na stop him!" Sir Bartlett said, slamming his hammer into the stone for emphasis. The head of the hammer burned with a sudden burst of crimson light, as if the weapon itself reflected the Forgemaster's innermost feelings.

"You did your best, now just try not to move so much," comforted Danny, concerned, a few of the Dwarf's wounds had opened up and were beginning to bleed anew.

"No, lad, ya do na understand," said Sir Bartlett, shaking his head. "Da ya remember when I told ya that ya name sounded familiar?"

Danny nodded in an attempt to keep the Dwarf from expending too much energy.

"On dis here day, I just remembered, Syndil has stolen da Bonded dat contains da soul of ya fatha and I allowed him ta take it."

"What're you saying?"

"Ya be Lightborn, lad. Ya fatha was a Knight o da Light."

"No," said Danny, confused as he stepped back. "My father was a soldier in the military. He died over seas, he was a hero."

Sir Bartlett braced himself against the stone. "Aye, lad, a hero and a soldier, but a knight he was too."

"Why would he have kept this from me?"

"Ta protect ya, lad."

"Sabrina told me what a Bonded was. It contains the essence of the knight placed within it. So, my father is still alive."

In the distance, a loud boom drew the knight and the squire's attention. Danny realized that the sound seemed much louder and closer than the first time.

"Father," whispered Danny, taking a series of steps toward the noise of battle.

"No, Squire Firoth, it does na work dat way. Ya father is gone, lad. Whatever remains in da shell of a Bonded isn't what it was before. It'll be ya fatha's energy sure enough, but it will not a be him."

"It doesn't matter," said Danny, his eyes remaining focused on the distant plume of black smoke. "I have to save him."

"Ya are no match fa Syndil, lad. Ya be but a squire. Let the Knights o da Light handle dis."

"No," said Danny, turning, he eyed Sir Bartlett with a new-found confidence. "I'm more than just a squire. I'm the Mageknight." He turned away from the bewildered Dwarf and disappeared around the corner, intending to put right what Syndil had wronged.

34

The Awakening of the Mageknight

Danny bolted to the left at a dead sprint, eyeing the ever-growing cloud of sooty smoke. He was getting closer. Turning the corner, he found himself at the center of the island, the Pool of the Mageknight was in front of him; a sickening circle of fallen knights surrounding it. Above him, the black cloud drifted endlessly upward. Danny traced it to the source, one of the four high towers that surrounded the pool was now little more than a pile of rubble. An unexpected cry of pain drew his attention to the right where a strange group of individuals surrounded what looked like the last living Knight of the Light.

Syndil stood in front of the knight, Danny was sure of it. Although he couldn't see his face, he recognized the silver Bonded leveled at the Knight of the Light's throat, as well as the Elf's, long, black hair, unkempt and drifting in the breeze. Syndil sported an intricate suit of silver armor, inlaid with shining blue veins of an unknown material that seemed to glow despite the waning sunlight. Three dark figure stood behind the captive knight, Danny failed to recognize them. Their skin was pitch-black, as if covered in soot, their eyes sparkled like sapphires, but without pupils and devoid of emotion. They wore no obvious form of armor, only robes of dark fabric.

"Gran Shadows," Danny whispered. He realized he shouldn't have said anything when Syndil's ear twitched in response and the three Shadows twisted their attention in his direction. They had all heard him.

Paying him no heed, Syndil flicked his wrist, angling his Bonded in a quick horizontal swipe.

The knight, his once-shiny armor battered and soiled with dust and blood, gripped his throat and dropped to his knees.

"No!" Danny yelled, taking three steps forward, but stopping as one of the three Shadows began to advance.

"No," ordered Syndil, stopping the Shadow mid-step, his back still turned. With a second flick of the wrist, he flung the small accumulation of crimson from the blade of his Bonded, leaving the brand unstained and shining. Sheathing his sword, he spun on his heel and greeted Danny with a sweeping smile. "Good morning, Squire Firoth," he said, as if they were meeting under normal circumstances.

"How could you!" Danny freed the sword at his side with a resounding ring of metal.

Sensing the threat in Danny's tone of voice, as well as his actions, the nearest Shadow advanced, only to be stopped by Syndil's outstretched hand. The Shadow produced a subtle hiss, apparently it had never been ordered in such a manner.

"You'd have done well to stay clear, Mageknight. My ability to control these Grans is somewhat limited, I must say that they seek your destruction most of all." With a mere look, Syndil forced the closest Shadow to retreat.

In that split-second, Danny noticed a white-hilted sword in Syndil's opposite hand, the most interesting feature was a silver band at the tip of the handle with an intricately carved eagle, wings outstretched and beak down as if to begin a dive. Memories of his father flooded his mind; he'd seen that very ring on the middle finger of his father's right hand as it passed by his face time and again.

"Father," he whispered.

"What was that?" Syndil asked, returning his attention to Danny. The Gran Shadow appeared appeased, for the moment, it returned to the proximity of the other two.

"Return the Bonded you stole," commanded Danny. His voice was loud, but controlled.

"I am afraid this Bonded is most crucial to my plans, Mageknight," said Syndil, holding the sword up, revealing a matching white wooden sheath.

"You will return my father's sword."

"...*Your* father's sword? Now, how could you have known that?" Syndil asked evenly, suggesting a genuine interest in the answer.

"Sir Bartlett told me."

"That old Dwarf is alive, is he? Most interesting," Syndil said with a shrug. He paused for a moment of thought. "I give you my word that once I am finished with this Bonded, I shall return it to you personally. After all, it was with your help that I was able to obtain it in the first place."

"I helped you in no such way," argued Danny.

"Ah, but you did, Squire Firoth. Without the description of your father's ring, I would have never known which Bonded to seek." For emphasis, Syndil angled the stolen Bonded before him, hilt-first and displayed the most obvious aspect that marked the sword as Danny's father's, the emblem of the eagle.

Danny's eyes lingered upon the eagle-crested ring that detailed the tip of the pommel. His heart sank. "You were never interested in me as the Mageknight. It was my father's Bonded that you desired all along," said Danny in a whisper, more to himself than the Elf.

"Partially, Squire Firoth, but the fact that you seem to carry the abilities of the Mageknight was an added bonus. In any case, as I said, I will gladly return the blade to you once I have finished with it. You have my word."

"Your word means nothing to me now," spat Danny, gripping the hilt of his sword with both hands, taking an offensive stance.

"And nor should it, Danny. However, you have it nonetheless." Syndil looked as if he was about to say more, a loud thunderclap caused him the slightest hesitation. A funnel of black clouds broke free of the swirling storm that encompassed the island and descended like a forming tornado.

Even Danny was surprised as the vortex grew larger in shape and faster in speed, touching down a short distance beyond the trinity of Gran Shadows.

"I am afraid I have run out of time, Squire; I must bid you adieu." With that, Syndil gave Danny his back and turned toward the whirling cyclone.

Rage stirred within Danny as he watched the Elf turn on him. "No!" he yelled, striking his right foot forward. He fought against the current of the windstorm and charged. His anger focused his mind as he entered into the Ghostsight. His sword whistled through the turbulent air, angled downward, aimed for the broad side of Syndil's back.

Quicker than Danny could predict, even with the Ghostsight, the Elf sidestepped to the left and spun. However, even though he was unable to foresee the movement, Danny could foretell where Syndil would end up. Fueled by an unrestrained fury, he followed through with his attack, connecting with open air and allowing the sword to pass harmlessly through the empty space that Syndil had only recently occupied. Permitting the pull of the sword to carry him full circle, he spun on his heel and pointed the sword downward so that it scraped against the stone of the street. Danny forced his attack, twisting the hilt into an upward line that scraped across Syndil's armor from hip to shoulder.

The Elf's surprised expression was priceless as Danny's sword carved a path of white sparks, denting Syndil's armor at the hip and breastplate.

Intent on finishing the duel, Danny reversed the momentum and brought the blade back down over the left side of Syndil's brow. However, his attack stopped inches from the Elf's face, blocked by the sheathed blade of the Bonded that had once been his father. *Seeing the ghostly image of the Elf begin to move against him*, Danny disengaged and retreated. Moving just in time, he avoided a sideways cut from Syndil's Bonded as the Elf unsheathed his sword and leveled a slashing attack, all in one smooth motion.

Syndil traced a silver arc through the space that Danny had just occupied, missing the swell of his chest by mere inches.

Danny angled his sword before him, maneuvering into a defensive stance, he was sure that Syndil would press the attack. Yet, the Elf stood perfectly still, investigating the thin line that indented his armor from the meat of his left hip to the curve of his right shoulder. However, the Gran Shadow standing behind him refused to wait; it took the initiative and stepped forward.

"No," Syndil ordered, turning on the dark creature.

This time, the Gran refused his request. It raised its alien hand, three pointed-fingers and a thumb, instead of the usual five Human fingers. Extending its right arm outward, the Shadow spread its fingers wide and pointed its palm toward Danny.

His training with the Ghostsight had only prepared him for a duel with one opponent. Whatever the Shadow had in mind, Danny could not predict in time.

As if answering Danny's thoughts, the Shadow planted its left foot forward. A series of tiny, glowing orbs of blue began to form around its extended hand, starting at the points of the fingers. Growing in size and intensity, the radiant globes floated into the palm, melding into a much larger scintillating sphere.

Mesmerized by the display, Danny snapped out of it as the Shadow's fingers snapped straight and forced the palm-sized orb to burst forward in a beam of potent blue energy. The ray doubled, tripled and quadrupled in size until it dwarfed Danny with its diameter, leaving him no room to dodge it. Standing his ground, Danny steadied his footing, tightened his grip and angled his sword in a downward swipe, meeting the initial concussive burst of the beam. Pushed back by the sheer power of the attack, Danny could feel his feet sliding against the stone as he managed to split the shaft of energy in half, the intense heat of it incinerating the sleeves of his robes. His footing began to falter and his arms grew weak. He couldn't hold out.

However, just as he began to lose hope, a streak of silver, followed by a flash of white, caught his eye to the right. A figure wielding two swords appeared in front of him and severed the blue beam from top to bottom. Yet, even the last bit of force from the ray proved too much for Danny. Thrown backward, he

tumbled across the stone street before coming to a stunning stop, his back thudding heavily against the Pool of the Mageknight. The concussion forced the grip on his sword to waver as it clanged against the stone beneath him.

Disoriented, Danny looked down, discovering that the blade had melted and was beyond repair. Looking up, he saw the outline of his savior, battling the wave of blue energy in his place. Although still dazed, Danny could make out some familiar features of the figure.

Danny notice that he carried a series of seven blades, five remaining in a unique fan-like scabbard strapped across his back, while wielding the other two in his hands. The most obvious characteristic was the pointed ears that marked him kindred of the Long-lived, an Elf.

"...Calador?" Danny questioned, no more than a whisper.

As if empowered by Danny's utterance, the Elf swooped both of his blades upward, forcing the angle of the crackling beam in the same direction. The sapphire ray traveled skyward, puncturing a hole in the swirling black clouds of the Eye. The shaft of azure light dissipated, allowing rays of sunlight to trickle through the dark clouds and linger for the briefest of moments before the raging storm swallowed them up once again.

The Gran Shadow advanced, but stopped in order to investigate Syndil's silver Bonded, which lingered just below its pointed chin, caressing its neck.

"No," said Syndil, his tone never wavering as his eyes locked on Calador. "Disobey me again and I will have your head."

The Shadow hesitated, its expression alien, unreadable. Then, taking a single step to the rear, it retreated. However, the Shadow's gaze remained fixed forward upon its prey.

"Are you alright, Squire?" Calador asked, his focus just as cautious. He didn't turn to face Danny.

Danny looked himself over, finding his robes tattered and burnt; the skin of his arms and face was raw and blistered and his body was bruised. Investigating his sword further, he noticed that it had halved in size, the blade had melted nearly to the hilt.

"My sword is useless," he said, retrieving the ruined blade, holding it before him in emphasis. Realizing that Calador couldn't see the damage, even if he was facing him, he tossed the now-worthless sword down next to him, the warped steel clanging pitifully upon the stone.

"Good," said Calador. "You shall not need it, you are not permitted to stay."

Danny was about to argue but he was cut off as Calador continued.

"You will run as quickly as your feet can carry you, run to the Castle of the Light where you will await further orders." Calador's voice was stern and rigid, leaving no room for argument.

"I am afraid he will not be permitted to leave," said Syndil, matter-of-factly, a smile curling up the side of his mouth. As the last syllable left the Elf's mouth, the three Gran Shadows disappeared in a disorienting display of speed, reappearing at the edge of three of the four roads that led out from the center, while Syndil casually moved to block the fourth. "We shall finish what we started so many years ago, my old friend."

"Friend!" spat Calador. "You are a traitor, a thief and a liar. I once honored you as a master of the sword and kindred of the race we share, a rival against whom I could measure my own skill. I even respected you after you took my eyes as well as my Bonded. However, what you have done this day is unforgivable and before this futility goes any further, you will tell me why."

"Why?" Syndil's smile simmered to a smirk. "Look around you, Calador. The Light grows weaker with every passing day. Our numbers dwindle with every drop of the moon and setting of the sun, while the Shadows extend their grip over this world. We are losing this war."

"You are a coward!" Calador yelled, his grip tightening around the hilts of his blades, causing his knuckles to whiten.

Syndil stepped forward, angling his Bonded downward in one smooth motion. "Call me what you will, Calador, but you must sense it as well. The Light has settled their hopes on the return of the Mageknight. Yet, there he sits, a mere shadow of the legend foretold in the literature. His power will not be enough to offset the influence of the Shadows."

Calador maneuvered into an offensive stance. "So, now you show your fair-weathered allegiance, backing the surest winner, betraying those that trusted you with their lives."

Syndil mirrored the movements of his opponent, leveling his Bonded before him while still holding the sheathed blade of the stolen Bonded in his opposite hand. "It was an easy enough choice. What is the alternative, to die fighting for the side you know will eventually lose, only to end up as some poor soul trapped in a sword for an eternity? I think not, that's not for me."

Calador scoffed. "So, instead, you choose to betray your own race as well as those you have sworn allegiance to, all the while manipulating a mere squire in the process?"

Syndil's smile widened as he sighed ever so softly. "'Tis inconsequential, my old friend, for I have made my choice. Now, you must make yours. I have not the time for any more discussion on this matter, and I fear you are impossibly far from changing my mind in any capacity. If you wish to finish this rivalry between us, now is the time and the place."

Calador gracefully twirled his blades in front of him, planting his right foot forward. "I am not your old friend, Syndil, but you must know that you are now my new enemy and I will stop you."

Syndil responded in kind, weaving his Bonded in a light-footed salute, the elegance of his movements just as smooth as the Elf opposite him. "I accept your challenge... my new enemy."

"For the Light," challenged Calador, using his forward foot to push off with as he began a headlong charge.

Syndil smiled and raised his Bonded above him. "Sever, Kryssagrim," he said, leveling a single downward slash in front of him. The blade of his Bonded pulsed with a silver flash, sending forth three individual pressure waves of white light that whistled as they sliced through the air and barreled down upon Calador.

Without missing a beat, Calador angled his swords around him in a speedy display. Parrying each attack in turn, he cut the waves in half, causing them to dissipate around him with a harmless soft hissing as he continued his charge. The surprised expression on Syndil's face was instantaneous as Calador leveled an attack of his own just below the chin line.

His sword found nothing but air. Syndil easily ducked the swipe. Pressing his assault, Calador followed up with a series of slashes and lunges. However, the speed of both Elves proved equal and Syndil met his opponent blow for blow, using the stolen Bonded as an offhand weapon.

Spinning away, Syndil retreated to a safe distance and settled into a defensive stance.

"Interesting," he said with a smile. "I see you remember Kryssagrim's first Awakening."

Calador twirled his blades around him, loosening the muscles of his arms. "How could I ever forget your old tricks."

Syndil's smile widened as he took the other Elf's comment as a compliment, rather than the insult it was intended to be. "Be that as it may . . . how is it that you are able to block my Bonded's Awakening without a Bonded of your own? You know as well as I that a Bonded's power can only be blocked by another Bonded, yet I specifically remember seeing yours shatter into at least seven pieces during our last duel."

"Exactly seven," said Calador, bringing both of his blades to bear and bringing them together. However, instead of the usual clang of metal meeting metal, something that one might expect to hear as two swords met, the blades produced a soft hissing, followed by a swirling wisp of sapphire smoke as they melded into one. The hilt of the newly-formed longsword changed and reformed, taking on a more intricate pattern, yet still appearing incomplete. The blade changed as well, elongating, gaining a soft blue glow.

Syndil's smile softened in the face of the display, from surprise or fear, Danny didn't know which.

"Most interesting," said Syndil.

Reaching behind him, Calador pulled another blade from the sheath on his back, the lowest on the left. Slightly smaller than the new sword in his opposite hand, the hilt of the third carried a similar pattern to the other, the engraved lines cut off as if it belonged to a larger whole.

"You had the seven pieces of your Bonded re-forged into seven individual swords," said Syndil, putting the pieces of the puzzle together. The Elf's smile returned to its former glory as he angled his Bonded to the left side of his body. "I am impressed, Calador, but it will not save you. Sever, Kryssagrim," he whispered. He leapt to the right and leveled his Bonded for three quick slashes, creating nine waves of silvery light that whistled through the air, aimed directly for Danny.

Danny attempted to roll out of the way; he closed his eyes, knowing that he would never make it in time. However, just when he expected to feel the first of the nine surges upon his back, he heard a loud series of pops and felt nothing more than harmless puffs of air flow around him. Opening his eyes and inching his head upward, to see what had happened, he saw Calador standing in front of him, both blades angled in a defensive position.

"Calador," Danny whispered, as he noticed a splash of crimson plummet to the right of the Elf's feet. He followed the trickle of red to a gaping wound that ran from Calador's right wrist to his upper bicep.

"Most impressive, Calador," said Syndil in a mocking tone. "Your skills have definitely improved, you managed to block nearly all of them. However, I knew that you would not allow the last to hit the squire and that you would shield him with your body. You always were so predictable."

Danny had never felt so helpless. Syndil was using him to distract Calador. The wound on the Elf's arm was his fault.

"...Calador!"

"Never mind me, Danny," interrupted Calador, bringing his two swords together, melding them into one. A wisp of dark energy formed around the newly-created blade as it grew slightly longer and became a dull black, seeming to draw in the light around it. The pattern on the black hilt shifted, causing the engraved grooves to twist and turn, yet still they appeared incomplete.

"Blind, Enigmir," said Calador, angling the sword before him.

Danny shifted his eyes to Syndil, yet he was too slow to see the surprise upon the Elf's face as a large sphere of utter darkness engulfed him.

Reaching behind him, Calador unsheathed a fourth blade from the scabbard on his back, stepped into his own globe of blackness and disappeared from sight.

The rounded edge of darkness stopped a few feet from where Danny crouched, appearing almost as a solid but he knew otherwise, Calador had stepped through it without the slightest resistance. Although he couldn't see

beyond the black curtain, Danny heard the sounds of combat echo from within the blackness.

Feeling more helpless than ever, he unsheathed the dragon-hilted dagger he'd received from Tyramear. The blade felt good in his grip and brought him some much-needed confidence. However, after investigating the dagger, peering at the distant Gran Shadows and then looking from blade to Shadows once again, Danny returned the small brand from whence it had come, it was useless. He needed a real weapon. In that instant, a distant longing called to him from behind. Looking up, he met the solid stone eyes of a statue, one of the four sculpted Knights of the Light that watched over the Pool of the Mageknight.

The Bonded of the Mageknight.

Standing up, he leapt to the edge of the pool and peered down into the crisp, clear water. The familiar sight of the sapphire-hilted sword floated just beneath the surface. For a moment, Danny found himself lost in the swirl of the blade, its edges crafted to sleek perfections, the blue brand's soft inner light beckoning him into its depths. It felt as if the blade was calling to him.

"You can do this," he told himself as he inched his right hand toward the calm water. A series of ripples swelled out from the point of contact as he lowered his fingers into the water, the waves distorting the image of the sword. Seeing his chance, Danny spread his hand wide and reached for the hilt, only to feel the flow of water filter through his fingers, the Bonded of the Mageknight was now just to the left of his grip.

Yanking his hand from the pool, Danny cursed himself. The draw of the blade increased, yearning for his touch. He didn't quite understand what he was doing wrong. If he truly was the Mageknight, then only he could pull the sword from the water. *Why can't I do it?*

"Think," he whispered.

Behind him, somewhere within the globe of darkness, the sound of combat continued, the Gran Shadows stood in an unwavering vigil.

"I have to do something," Danny whispered with new-found confidence. "Calador needs my help. My father needs my help." Focusing his concentration, he entered into the trance that Syndil had taught him, controlling his breathing, clearing his mind. The Ghostsight settled over the Bonded within the pool, causing *a silhouette to appear around the sword, which seemed to waver backward and forward as the ripples in the water began to settle*. Taking a deep breath, he leveled his right hand over the water once again and reached down for the second time. The water stirred in response to his touch, causing the reflection of the blade below to waver and warp. Putting his hand farther into the tepid water, Danny gasped with surprise as *the ghostly image of the blade dodged to the right of his fingers*, while the real image remained in place, inches from his grasp.

Ignoring the impulse to keep moving toward the obvious reflection, Danny shifted his grip to the location of the Ghostsight's image, hoping the actual sword would appear there momentarily. Closing his hand around what appeared to be nothing but water, he felt the cool touch of something solid. Then, within the blink of an eye, the Bonded of the Mageknight appeared within his grasp, the ripples of the water lapping at his bicep.

In one smooth motion, Danny pulled the blade from the pool, freeing it from the depths as the water dripped down his arm. Holding the blade before him, he tested its weight and found it much lighter than expected. It almost felt as if it weighed nothing at all, it was light as a feather. Taking a couple of practice swings, the blade whistled as if it were cutting the air itself.

"I did it!" Danny said to no one in particular, and then...

Greetings, Danny Firoth, said an unfamiliar voice that seemed to echo from all around him.

Danny turned in every conceivable direction, but found no one. "Who's there?" he asked.

You may call me Magear, said the deep-toned voice.

"Where are you?"

I am here, Danny, the speaker said in unison with a soft pulse of light that emanated from the Bonded of the Mageknight.

Danny pulled the blade closer to his eyes, entranced by the beauty and intricacy of the sapphire sword. "You're... in the sword?"

A light chuckle echoed all around him. *No, Danny, I am not in the sword. I am the sword. I am your Bonded and you are my wielder. Together, we are one.*

"You're Magear Rolk Knight, Mageknight of the Light," Danny declared, adjusting his grip, holding the sword at arm's length.

Danny felt an odd sensation, a feeling of sadness not his own, creep over him.

I have not heard that name for some time. However, I am afraid I am a mere shade of what I once was. The transition of affixing oneself within a Bonded is most taxing. I am afraid I remember very little of my past life.

"I'm sorry, Magear."

Danny felt the mood of the blade brighten. *Do not be sorry, Danny. This is something that I chose.*

"How is it that I can feel your emotions?"

As I said before, Danny, we are now Bonded. You can feel my emotions, just as I can sense yours. You are the only one who can hear me because I am speaking within your mind. Simply think your responses and I will hear you.

Like this? Danny thought.

Yes, the blade said within Danny's mind. However, now is not the time to practice. I believe you have a friend who needs your help.

Faster than Danny could think, two pressure waves whooshed out from the sphere of darkness. Danny spun, avoiding the first as it traveled past him and severed the stone statue behind him cleanly in half. Reflexively blocking the second with Magear, a surge of air swelled around him as the wave of silvery energy dissipated harmlessly across the sapphire edge of the sword. Less than a moment later, Calador came crashing to the ground beside him, thrust out of his own dark creation by an unknown force. The globe of darkness wavered for a split-second before disappearing, revealing a tired-looking Syndil. His shoulders seemed to sag, and his breath came in heavy waves. His armor, marked with various slash marks, suggested that Calador had landed several blows.

Looking down at Calador, Danny noticed that the Elf appeared to be in worse condition, his robes were populated with various slashes and stained with crimson from a series of deep cuts.

"A most interesting trick," said Syndil, the sure smile once again appearing across his face, despite his apparent exhaustion. "It might have been more useful if you had a proper suit of armor." Caught up in his gloating, the Elf hesitated as his eyes moved from the sullen Calador to the bright sapphire blade in Danny's hand. "So, it is true, you are the Mageknight. You have pulled the fabled sword from its watery keep."

"So, that's who you were talking to," said Calador, making his way back to his feet, using the dark sword in his right hand as a crutch.

"Are you alright?" Danny asked, never taking his eyes off Syndil.

"I will live," said Calador, tearing a strip of fabric from his robe and wrapping it around a cut on his forearm.

Syndil's smile widened. "I would very much like to put your new sword to the test, Mageknight."

"Your duel is with me, traitor!" Calador yelled, taking a wobbly step forward.

"I am afraid our duel is over, my old friend. You are in no condition to continue."

"We have unsettled business, you and I," argued Calador.

"As far as I am concerned, it is quite settled." Syndil swiped Kryssagrim through the air. "Sever," he said, creating three gleaming waves of energy.

Danny bounded forward, stepping in front of Calador, as the Ghostsight, which seemed to activate instinctively, alerted him to Syndil's attack. Now, the vision appeared crisper and slower, as if he was looking through a new set of eyes. Magear felt like a gentle breeze in his hand as his Bonded whistled around him, cutting Syndil's energy waves out of the air one by one.

Syndil's smile remained fixed upon his face, yet there was surprise in his eyes. "This is most curious, indeed."

"Return the Bonded of my father."

"I have already given you my word, Squire Firoth. You shall have the blade returned to you once it has served its purpose."

Danny was about to take a step forward when he felt a heavy hand upon his right shoulder.

"Get behind me, Danny, you are no match for him," Calador recommended.

"And neither are you, in your current condition," said Danny, refusing to take his eyes off his opponent.

Get ready, Magear said, his calm voice coinciding with the movement of Syndil's ghostly outline, predicting an attack.

Following the foretold pattern, Syndil flicked Kryssagrim in a series of lightning-quick swipes, slashing relentlessly through the air.

"Shred, Kryssagrim," he whispered, sending a relentless assault of glistening energy waves shrieking through the air. For every swing of the sword, three more waves appeared.

Shrugging off Calador's restraining hand, Danny leapt forward, intending to meet the swelling number of force waves head-on. With his heightened Ghostsight, he parried each wave in turn, causing them to dissipate harmlessly around him in silvery puffs of air. However, there seemed to be no end to them as Syndil weaved Kryssagrim in an endless pattern of destructive force.

You cannot keep this up much longer, Danny.

I know, Danny thought, beginning to feel the effects of his exertion. His lungs yearned for air and his muscles began to burn with exhaustion. In addition, he could feel his body begin to slow from the recent wounds gained from his confrontation with the Gran Shadow and its blue energy orbs; he felt a series of sharp pains, beginning in his chest, running up his neck and down through his right arm. His movements began to slow. He barely blocked a string of three energy waves, three more quickly taking their place. Danny panicked, he managed to take out the first wave and the second, but he over extended, allowing the third to slip through his defenses and arc upward toward his chest. Knowing that he couldn't reach it in time, he prepared for the impact.

However, nothing struck him, a black-bladed sword slipped up in front of him, inches from his nose and severed the attack in twain. The rogue wave scattered around him in a wisp of wind.

"Do not give up now, Mageknight," encouraged Calador, taking up a position next to Danny, blocking two more waves.

Angling Magear upward, Danny sliced through the third. With the help of the Ghostsight, Danny was able to anticipate which waves Calador would miss; they worked together, as a team, caught up in a dance of death-defying defense. However, the pain in Danny's chest didn't lessen. His lungs continued to crave air, his muscles burned continuously from the forced movements.

"I can't... keep this up... much longer," whispered Danny, knowing that Calador's keen hearing would pick up his plea.

"Nor I... Mageknight."

As if from nowhere, a huge beam of golden energy swept through the surge of Syndil's attacks, destroying every silvery wave in a loud swoosh of air. The shaft of light slanted skyward and cut a sizable hole in the surrounding storm above, then it dissipated. The gap in the dark clouds lingered, allowing a large ray of sunlight to shine through before the storm surged around it and swallowed the opening.

"What... was that?" Danny questioned Calador, his breathing haggard and forced.

"The King of the Light," Calador said, his voice heavy with relief.

Danny turned and followed the path of the amber beam back to its origin; he found the King of the Light standing over the disintegrating form of a Gran Shadow.

The king wore a glittering suit of golden armor, a shield made from the same precious metal and a brandished Bonded that seemed to glow like the noonday sun. Next to the King of the Light stood Sabrina, Matt, Chris, Alonso, Anthony, Doug and Briza, weapons bared and ready. Behind them, an entire army of Knights of the Light and squires stood ready to assist them.

"Syndil Sartak Tribolari!" the king yelled in a bold and commanding voice.

"It seems my time here has come to an end," said Syndil, presenting those gathered with a mock salute and sheathing his Bonded. With flashes of darkness, the remaining two Gran Shadows appeared on either side of him. Turning, the two Shadows escorted him to edge of the dark vortex. Syndil lingered at the precipice.

"...Syndil!" Danny yelled, gritting his teeth in rage, fighting through the lingering pain in his chest. He surged forward, yet didn't get far, Calador applied a restraining hand to his right bicep.

"It is too late," said the Elf, pulling Danny back to the edge of the pool.

"Get back," the King of the Light ordered those around him to a safe distance.

Forced back behind the Pool of the Mageknight, Danny refused to take his eyes off Syndil as the upsurge of the black twister increased in ferocity.

Syndil turned at the last instant, meeting Danny's steady gaze with his own. In that moment, a sweeping smile crossed his face and the raging cyclone swallowed him whole.

"Get down," Calador ordered, shoving Danny behind the rounded edge of the pool as the black tornado increased in size and shape, sucking up large chunks of stone and surrounding rubble.

Danny watched the ruined sword he had wielded as a squire clang across the stone, the vortex yanking it into the dark void. The windy turbulence culminated in a sudden whoosh of air, just before scattering without a trace, leaving small pieces of stone and debris to tumble end over end back to the ground.

"Are you alright, Danny?" Calador's voice sounded somewhat distant.

With the immediate threat of danger over, Danny allowed the pain and exhaustion to envelop him as he slumped to the ground and fell into the inviting bliss of unconsciousness.

"Danny," he heard Calador call to him again, this time he sounded even further away.

35

The Tale of the Black Bonded

Danny awoke to a soft jerk of his hand, stirring groggily. With a shift of his head, he followed his outstretched right arm to the side of the bed where he spied Sabrina. Sound asleep, both of her hands were wrapped in his.

"Hey," he said, groaning. He squeezed her hands lightly with his own.

Sabrina came awake right away. "You are awake! We were all very worried."

"...We?"

Sabrina began to move away from the bed, "I will get the healer."

"Wait," Danny begged, holding onto her hand, pulling her back toward the edge of the bed.

Sabrina turned back toward him.

"I'm sorry for lying to you."

Sabrina gave Danny's hand a gentle squeeze before placing it back on the bed. "Do not worry about that now," she said with a smile. "You need your rest. Now, just lie still and I will get the healer."

In no condition to argue, Danny relaxed into the soft fluff of the bedding. Noticing his arms for the first time since the altercation with Syndil, he was somewhat alarmed to see rolls of white bandaging wrapped from his wrists to his shoulders. Looking down at his body, he noted that the same dressings

bound his chest, a slight but sharp pain was also present. The ache seemed to come with even the smallest of movements or shallowest of breaths. However, he didn't have long to think about his predicament. Sabrina returned a few moments later, a man in dark-green robes with the symbol of Light stitched on the chest followed behind her.

"So, you are awake, Squire Firoth," the man said, making his way to the side of the bed. With soft brown hair and welcoming blue eyes, he had an aura of calm about him. "I am Sir Virgil, a Healer of the Light. How are you feeling?"

"A little weak and..." Danny held up his bandaged arms as an unsaid final word.

"I am afraid you sustained some first and second-degree burns to your hands and arms. Your weakness is normal, Squire. You have been unconscious for about two days now. It will take time for you to regain your full strength."

"Two days!" Danny tried to sit up, a surprised reaction. However, the sudden sting of chest pain forced him back onto the bedding. "Where am I?" he asked, looking around the room, seeing that he was but one of many lying in a row of beds. A series of long, narrow windows, made from colorful stained glass, bathed the room in a soft rainbow of colors.

"Easy, Squire," the healer ordered, putting a restraining hand on Danny's shoulder so that he didn't attempt such a reckless action a second time. "In addition to the burns, two of your ribs were broken and a third was fractured. I have done all I can to speed up the healing process, but the Human body can only heal so fast. You are currently in the infirmary, located in the eastern wing of the Castle of Light. I am afraid you will have to remain here and rest for at least another full day. As you can see," said Sir Virgil, motioning toward the other injured occupants, "Syndil's betrayal was most devastating indeed. You are lucky to have only sustained the injuries you received."

Danny relaxed slowly, trying to remember the events before his black out.

"Magear!" he called out, recalling that he'd recovered the Bonded of the Mageknight.

"Relax, Squire Firoth," assured Sir Virgil. "We of the Light are well aware of the ties that a knight has to his Bonded. It is here." Reaching down to the side of the bed, the healer produced the familiar sapphire hilt, sheathed in a royal blue scabbard with the symbol of Light attached at the midpoint, molded from sparkling platinum with a royal blue hue. "Sir Bartlett saw to the sheath," Sir Virgil explained, presenting the sword to Danny with both hands, careful not to touch the hilt.

"Thank you," said Danny, taking the blade in hand.

"So, it is true," Sabrina said, inching closer to get a better look at the sword.

"What's true?"

"You are the Mageknight," her eyes grew wide in excitement.

"I guess so," said Danny, angling his gaze downward, her words were like a dagger in his heart, reminding him of the lies he'd told her.

"Rest, Squire," encouraged Sir Virgil, placing a light hand on Danny's shoulder, giving him a gentle squeeze. "I shall inform the King of the Light that you are awake."

Danny snapped out of his dark mood. "...The king?"

Sir Virgil produced a soft smile. "Yes, the king, he requested an audience with you as soon as you awoke. I was instructed to notify him the instant you regained consciousness."

"What would the King of the Light want with me?"

"You are the Mageknight, Squire. The question is, what *wouldn't* the King of the Light want with you?" With that, Sir Virgil produced a soft smile, turned and made his way to a pair of large silver doors. "Oh," he said, stopping and turning, "You have some other visitors, they have been anxious to see you. Should I show them in?"

Danny looked at Sabrina, who nodded, suggesting that the answer must be yes. "Yes, please, Sir Virgil."

With a slight nod, Sir Virgil turned and exited the chamber. A few moments later, the double doors burst open as Chris, Alonso, Matt, Anthony, Doug and Briza entered the chamber, forming a half-circle at the foot of Danny's bed.

"We were all pretty worried about you, man," said Chris.

"I cannot believe Syndil turned out to be a traitor to the Light," said Briza, dropping her gaze and shaking her head. "He has not only disgraced himself but the race of the Elves as well."

"You can't judge an entire race based on the actions of one," added Doug, placing a reassuring hand on Briza's shoulder. He smiled. "I can still think of a few Elves that represent their race quite well."

Briza returned the smile, "Thank you."

"You look terrible," said Alonso bluntly, a combined look of anger radiated from everyone. He shrugged his shoulders. "What?"

Anthony crossed his arms, the sheer size of his biceps stretching the fabric of the robes taut. "You fought well," he said with a nod.

"Is that the Bonded of the Mageknight?" Matt asked, adjusting his glasses for a clearer look.

Danny presented the blade for everyone to see as best he could.

Leaning forward for a closer look, Matt reached out as if to touch the hilt. However, he retreated from Sabrina's swatting hand.

"No," she said, stepping forward, forcing Matt backward. "A Bonded is only to be touched by the wielder. It is dangerous to touch another's Bonded."

"Why?"

Sabrina visibly relaxed. "You would have been aware of this fact if you were Lightborn, but since you are only first-years and have not received a Bonded of your own, there is no way you could have known."

"Each Bonded has a personality of its own," Briza lectured, jumping in. "You can never be sure how a Bonded might react if touched by one who is not its wielder. Grave injuries have been known to result from such contact."

"What kind of injuries?" Matt asked, withdrawing his hand, resuming his close proximity to the bed in an attempt to get a better look, like a moth to a flame.

"Severe burns, blindness, or the loss of a limb," said Sabrina matter-of-factly. "Just to name a few," she added with a shrug.

Matt took a step back. "It's an epic sword, looks better from a distance." His comment caused chuckles, easing the tension in the room a little.

Danny placed Magear on the bed beside him. "Oh yeah, who won the final duel between Lion Army and Dragon Army?" he asked, turning his attention toward Sabrina, ashamed that he'd forgotten about the event until now.

Sabrina tensed at the question. "Neither side, once the bells sounded the alarm, the duel was stopped immediately."

"I'm sorry," Danny whispered.

Sabrina met Danny's gaze. "Do not be. It was not your fault."

"But it feels like it was my fault. None of this would've happened if it weren't for me."

"You are right. It is your fault," said Briza, causing those gathered around the bed to shoot her a look of warning.

Doug placed a restraining hand on Briza's arm. "Perhaps you should..."

Briza glared at Doug. "No," she said, turning back to Danny. "The members of the Light have waited centuries for your return and, yes, you are right to think that you are responsible for the unofficial celebration that is taking place on this island despite the tragic event of Syndil turning traitor. You are at fault for inspiring hope to those that had all but given up."

"She's right, man," said Chris. "Your name is being uttered almost everywhere. Syndil is second-hand news compared to your new title as Mageknight."

"That is not exactly official yet," said a stern yet familiar voice. Danny looked up to find Calador standing just beyond the doorway. "Not until the King of the Light sanctions you, of course."

"...Calador!" Danny said as the Elf closed the distance and joined the group. "You're unhurt?" he questioned, looking Calador up and down, not finding even the smallest of scratches. "I could've sworn you were wounded nearly as bad, if not worse, than I. How is it that I'm in this bed while you're up and walking around?"

"I am an Elf, Danny, and you are a Human. Our physical bodies differ quite a bit. You see, Elves are more attuned to magical healing, the Human body can only repair itself at a limited speed, even when helped by magical means."

Danny winced as he adjusted himself. "Yeah, I suppose Sir Virgil already said as much."

"How are you feeling?"

"I've been better but I have some questions for you."

"Of course you do, but the king will be arriving momentarily, so I will answer as much as I can in the time that we have."

"The black sword you wielded. Was that your Bonded?" Danny asked with a probing empathy.

"What is left of it... yes."

"Then you've regained the powers of your Bonded?"

"No," Calador said without the slightest hint of emotion, as if he'd come to terms with this fact a long time ago. "When Enigmir was destroyed by Syndil, she was shattered into seven individual pieces. With the help of Sir Bartlett, I was able to re-forge Enigmir into seven separate swords. Through practice, secretly, I learned to combine these pieces into a larger whole, regaining some of her Awakenings. However, the bond between the blades only lasts for a short amount of time."

"You said she?" Danny asked, he'd only recently learned firsthand that the bond between wielder and Bonded was an intimate relationship.

"Enigmir was my elder sister," said Calador, his composure cracking at admission. "She was killed in service to the Light before my birth and she chose to join the ranks of the Bonded. It is rare that a Bonded links with a blood relative, but it is not altogether unheard of."

"I'm sorry, Calador. I had no idea," said Danny solemnly, glancing down at Magear.

"As I told you from the beginning, Danny, your sympathy, although thoughtful, is not required."

"Are you... able to hear ..." Danny's words grew fainter before trailing off.

"Her thoughts are lost to me," said Calador, knowing full well the extent of Danny's question.

Briza's hand drifted to her mouth in utter shock. "You must truly hate Syndil," she said, her words little more than a whisper.

"I hold no grudge against him for the destruction of my Bonded. However, his betrayal of the Light, that is another matter."

Danny opened his mouth to ask another question. However, he was quickly silenced as Calador held up his right hand in a plea for peace.

"Please, I would prefer that the subject of our conversation be changed to more immediate matters."

Danny nodded in understanding, a gesture that was not apparently lost on the blind Elf.

"Thank you."

Danny hesitated and then asked his next question. "What was that black tornado thing? I don't remember much before I blacked out."

Clearly relieved to be off the subject of himself, Calador answered, "What you witnessed was a Shadow Flux, Danny, a tear in our reality created by the Shadows. Essentially, it is a doorway to the Shadow Realm. If you had been caught within it, you would have most likely awakened in the realm of the Shadows, rather than here in the infirmary."

Danny dropped his gaze at the thought. "And Syndil allowed himself to be swept up in that voluntarily?"

"Since no remnants of his presence have been found, we assume so. His traitorous actions run deep."

Danny looked up with hopeful eyes. "And my father's sword...?"

Calador shook his head from side to side. "...Is lost."

"For the time being," said a deep, resonating voice.

Everyone turned toward the sound as the King of the Light entered the chamber, Alamber Halfelvin followed directly behind him.

Suddenly in the presence of the king, Calador honored his leader with a slight nod. "...My lord."

Danny had only seen the King of the Light from a distance, now, in such close proximity, he found himself awed in the king's presence; he was so overwhelmed that he stared without blinking.

The king wore a fine white robe, accented with golden trim and stitching, his robust physique accenting the form-fitting fabric. His beard, as white as freshly fallen snow, sported two long braids that fell just beneath the corners of his mouth. His right hand lingered on the hilt of a golden sword at his side. The pommel of the blade was engraved to depict a detailed crusade of angels and demons locked in endless combat.

The longer Danny stared at the King's Bonded, the more he thought he saw those represented upon the hilt actually move. However, before Danny could contemplate the Bonded any further, the King of the Light stepped forward and stopped just at the edge of his bed, Alonso and Anthony parted to let him through. Drawn to the smooth crown on the king's head, Danny found himself mesmerized by its soft white glow which looked like a halo.

"It is good to see you have regained your wits, Squire Firoth," said the King of the Light, his voice bold and commanding. Placing his hand on the baseboard of the bed, he asked, "How are you feeling?"

Forced into conversation, Danny looked closely at the king, finding the large man's golden-brown eyes rather startling. "...Fine, my king."

The King of the Light eased himself forward, putting most of his weight on his frontward hand, causing the bed to creak. "Please, call me Sire Koltair. There is a time and place for formality, but this is neither that time nor that place. That is, of course, unless you would rather I address you as Mageknight."

"Honestly, my king... I mean, Sire Koltair, I haven't gotten used to being called by that title, and I'm not sure I ever will."

Sire Koltair smiled. "To be completely honest with you, Squire Firoth, I have never truly gotten used to the title of king myself. You see, I was not placed in this role due to traditions of nobility or royalty. The King of the Light is more a political title than anything else. It was not the predisposition of my blood that earned me this role, but, rather, my ambition to obtain it. It is not beyond reason that you could someday become the King of the Light yourself, or, perhaps, someone else in this room, for that matter."

"I could become king?" Alonso questioned. His eyes grew distant, as if, at that very moment, he was imagining his future as the King of the Light.

"If that is your ambition," the King stated. "But I digress. I did not come here to discuss politics. As all of you know, the Light has suffered a grave betrayal. However, the Light has also been blessed with the return of the Mageknight, you, Squire Firoth."

"I'm still not sure what that means."

"Nor am I, Squire Firoth, the ancient text is quite limited on the subject; I know you are well aware of that." Turning around, the king shot Calador an accusing look.

Danny eyed the same Elf curiously.

"Calador has been most forthcoming, Squire Firoth. He has revealed all to me," Sire Koltair said, turning back to Danny.

Shame filled Danny's heart as he dropped his gaze. "Oh," he said softly.

Sire Koltair sighed. "Do not blame yourself for doing something that you thought was right, Squire Firoth. I understand what your reasoning was at the time. However, in the future, I would ask that you be more open with your superiors, myself included."

"Yes, Sire Koltair."

"I would also ask that you meet my eyes when you answer me, Squire Firoth. One can tell much from another's gaze."

Looking up, Danny met the king's golden-brown eyes. "Yes, Sire Koltair," he said again.

"The blame is not yours alone, Danny," said Alamber, taking a silent step forward. "None of us, Calador included, could have known the depth of Syndil's betrayal."

"I understand that Syndil has turned to the Dark but why did he take my father's sword?"

Calador stepped forward. His blindfolded gaze focused in Danny's general direction. "You do understand that the blade Syndil stole is not simply your father's sword?"

"Yes," said Danny, dropping his eyes once more. "The sword Syndil took is a Bonded created from my father's soul. Sir Bartlett told me."

"...What?!" Sabrina said, looking to Calador, Alamber and then to Sire Koltair for an answer. When no answer appeared to be forthcoming, she held Danny's bandaged hand in her own. "I am sorry, Danny. I had no idea."

"We will get him back, man," Chris assured, placing a comforting hand on Danny's shoulder.

Briza gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. "That's horrible."

Danny could feel his heart pounding faster with every passing second. His sadness turned to rage as he balled his left hand into a fist, ignoring the searing pain that followed. "Why'd he take my father?" Danny asked, raising his head, meeting Sire Koltair's gaze.

Everyone turned their attention to the King of the Light, awaiting an answer.

Sire Koltair looked straight at Danny. "Ten years ago, your father, along with a cohort of other Knights of the Light, set out on a secret mission to obtain a rare artifact of legend, the Black Bonded. Said to have been created from the essence of a Shadow, the possession of this weapon would strengthen the Shadow hordes beyond the capability of the Light. If they possessed this weapon, Squire Firoth, it would allow the Shadows to fashion Bondeds of their own. This could not be allowed to happen." The king paused to allow the full weight of his words to sink in. "Your father was successful, his fellow Knights of the Light were slaughtered.

"Before your father passed and allowed his essence to be placed within the shell of a Bonded, he hid the Black Bonded in a location known only to him. The reason Syndil wanted the Bonded containing your father was to locate the final resting place of the Black Bonded. Because a Bonded will only awaken when touched by its eventual Bond mate, we were unable to question your father about the resting place of the Black Bonded. However, even if we could have, the transition from body to blade can be most confounding, and it is unknown whether your father even remembers its location anyway.

"Most likely, it is Syndil's intention to force your father's Bonded to consciousness and coerce him to reveal the location of the Black Bonded."

"Why wasn't I told about this?"

"Only a handful of Knights of the Light were privy to this information. Additionally, it was your father's wish that you be kept as far away from the conflict between the Light and the Dark as possible. He did not want this life for you, Squire Firoth. However, it seems that it was your destiny regardless, as the Mageknight, you would have been pulled into this ancient struggle whether

you wanted to be or not. Syndil must have chosen you because of your father, hoping that some clue concerning the whereabouts of the Black Bonded may have been passed down to you. Syndil must have considered it an added bonus that you actually turned out to be the Mageknight."

Danny dropped his eyes. "Yes, he said as much, he used me."

"Syndil used all of us, Danny," Calador said in a calm voice.

"What happens now?" Danny asked, taking comfort in Calador's words.

"What'll be required of me now that I'm the Mageknight?"

The King of the Light smiled. "You are the Mageknight in title only, Squire Firoth. I am afraid that, in mind and body as well as ability, you are still just a Squire of the Light. Thus, you shall fulfill only the requirements of that duty at this time. You will remain a Squire at the White Rock Academy of Illumination, being no different from the friends gathered around you. You have reached the end of your first year as a squire and as such, you must make a choice. You may choose to continue your training to become a Knight of the Light, or, if it is your wish, you may return to the life you knew before. No one within the Light will stop you."

"You're saying I could simply go home and not have to return."

"...If that is your choice, Squire Firoth."

"...Even though I am the Mageknight?"

"Even so, the Light will not force you to fight."

In turn, Danny met the eyes of his friends. He wondered what they would choose to do, given recent events.

"You should know that your friends have already decided," said Sire Koltair, as if reading Danny's thoughts.

Danny looked closely at his friends. "I'd like to know their decisions before I make my own."

The king responded with a slight nod and said, "Of course."

Chris was the first to speak. "You know me, man. I've never been one to back down from a fight. I have chosen to return next year and continue my training to become a knight."

Danny smiled at his oldest friend, the truth of his words was heart-warming. Chris was forever faithful. Once he put his mind to something, he would allow nothing to stand in his way.

Alonso spoke up next, "I had already planned on returning, now that I know I could become the king, I want to come back even more."

Sire Koltair shot the black-haired squire a quizzical look. Alonso's stone-faced expression caused a series of small chuckles to erupt from his friends.

Matt sighed and shook his head. After adjusting his glasses, he said, "Who wouldn't want to come back to a place like this, where magic exists alongside

creatures of legend and fantasy? I'll return, even at the risk of my own life. I can't go back to being the nerdy kid at school, being bullied on a daily basis."

"Somehow, I do not think that will be a problem for you anymore, Squire Mickler," said Calador.

It was true. Danny glanced at Matt. The training they all had undergone had transformed Matt the most. The plump bulge of his belly had disappeared, the once-soft places of his body had been replaced with hard muscle.

"Besides, everyone here will never let that happen," stated Chris. "If anyone is going to bully you, it will be us."

"I agree with Matt," said Doug. "Not about the bullying part, but the allure of this place." He glanced over at Briza. "I find the Elvin race fascinating and I could never continue to have a normal life knowing such amazing things exist in this world. I'll continue my training."

Briza returned Doug's look. "I am Lightborn. It is my duty to continue my training."

"Of course, I have chosen to return," added Anthony, puffing his chest out. "I hope to become the strongest of the knights."

Danny turned to Sabrina and awaited her response.

Sabrina smiled. "I am a second-year squire. There is no reason for me to quit now."

Danny returned her smile and glanced back to meet the steady gaze of Sire Koltair. "I choose to return and continue my training as a Squire of the Light, as well as the Mageknight."

Sire Koltair smiled. "So shall it be, Squire Firoth, Mageknight of the Light."

With that, loud joyous whoops escaped the mouths of Danny's friends.

"Quiet," shushed Sir Virgil, coming up behind Chris and Alonso. "Please, I still have other patients who need their rest. Speaking of which, I believe Squire Firoth has had enough for the day. That means you as well, my king."

Out of respect, Sire Koltair nodded in the healer's direction and said, "Of course, Sir Virgil." Turning in the direction of everyone else present, he continued, "Come, let us allow Squire Firoth to rest." To Danny, he said, "Should you need anything more, Mageknight, let Sir Virgil know and I shall see to it." With that said, the King of the Light began ushering everyone out before turning to leave himself.

One at a time, Chris, Alonso, Matt, Anthony, Briza and Doug said goodbye to Danny; Sabrina lingered at Danny's bedside.

"Wait."

Sire Koltair stopped and turned. "Yes, Squire Firoth?"

"What about my father's Bonded?"

"That should not be your concern, Squire Firoth. Please leave that to the Light. I have some of our elite knights looking into the matter. I recommend

that you concentrate on recuperating your strength, maintaining your studies and completing your training."

Danny hesitated for a moment. Losing his father at such a young age had been such a hard experience, a tragedy he'd never fully recovered from; to lose him for a second time left a deep pit of despair in his stomach. "I'll try," was all he managed to say.

"That is all I could ever ask for," encouraged the King of the Light. His gaze lingered on Danny a moment more before moving to Sabrina as she stood at the side of the bed. "Will you be joining us, Squire Drake?"

"I will only be but a moment."

"As you wish," said the king. He turned, escorted everyone out of the infirmary and closed the doors behind him.

"He really does need his rest, Squire," said Sir Virgil, stopping on the opposite side of the bed. "His wounds should be fully healed by the morrow. You will have plenty of time to talk on the journey home."

Sabrina nodded. "I will really be only a moment."

Returning the nod, Sir Virgil said, "Of course, but *only* a moment." With his rounds complete, he retreated, leaving the two of them alone.

Sabrina waited a few seconds before turning to Danny. "About what was discussed a few months ago before your duel with Squire Rigil?"

"About me being a distraction for you?"

Sabrina visibly hardened; her posture became more erect and her expression stern. "I have come to think it is the other way around, Danny."

"I don't understand."

"You are the Mageknight. As such, your duty is to lead the Light in the extermination of the Dark. For this task, you will require focus and dedication. I cannot allow your feelings for me to cloud the path before you."

"You can't be serious," said Danny, pushing himself up, ignoring the pain that would follow.

"I have already made up my mind."

"Fine, but first, look me in the eyes and tell me that you don't feel the same way."

"My feelings for you are secondary to the fate of the Light, Danny."

"So you *do* have feelings for me?"

"It does not matter whether I do or do not."

"Of course it matters. It matters to me."

Sabrina turned away from him. "I have already decided, Danny. The Light is more important than either one of us."

"Don't I get a say in this?"

Sabrina turned back toward Danny, her face as firm as stone. "No, you do not."

A short period of silence passed between them. Danny slumped back into the bed, unsure of what else he could say to change her mind.

Sabrina broke the silence. "I will forever be your friend, as well as your comrade in arms, Danny, but that is all I can offer you. I will understand if you desire neither of me from this moment forward."

"No," said Danny, his focus fixed at the foot of the bed. He refused to meet her eyes due to a growing pit of emptiness in his stomach. "I value your friendship more than anything, and I'd be lost without it. I just need... time."

"And rest," added Sabrina. "We have a long journey back home tomorrow. You should sleep."

"Yes," said Danny, feeling awkward, wondering if Sabrina felt the same way.

"Then, I will leave you to it," said Sabrina, turning toward the door stiffly, her movements lacked her usual grace.

Danny allowed her to go, confused about what had just transpired. After several minutes, just thinking, he took a deep breath and reached for the hilt of Magear. Wrapping his hand around the pommel, he noticed that the blade felt warm to the touch, like a proper handshake.

Magear...

I am here, Danny.

So, what am I supposed to do now?

If I may, you might consider that your friend is right.

"You heard me talking to Sabrina?" Danny asked aloud, his shock caused him to verbalize his words.

Danny felt Magear's mood lighten. *We are Bond mates, Danny. I can feel your emotions and hear your thoughts just as you have equal access to mine.*

Looking around to see if anyone had overheard him, Danny pulled the sword to his chest. *...Even if I'm not touching your hilt?*

Even if, for we are connected by a stronger bond than simply the touch of skin.

That's a little disturbing.

On the contrary, Danny, I find it rather comforting. It would be most difficult if I had to bear this isolation without anyone to share my thoughts with.

I'm sorry. I didn't realize... Danny allowed his thoughts to trail off as he attempted to imagine the loneliness that must come with becoming a Bonded.

Do not be sorry and do not pity me, Danny. It was an honor as well as my duty to choose the existence of a Bonded.

Danny adjusted his position in the bed to one that was more comfortable, he relaxed his rigid muscles. *So, you were the Mageknight once, right?*

In a manner of speaking, yes, I was.

Well, from one Mageknight to another, what is it that I'm supposed to do?

I am afraid that is something you will have to figure out for yourself, Danny. You see, my previous life is nothing more than a flash of images. The details are a confusing mess of garbled memories. See for yourself.

Danny's grip tightened around Magear's hilt as flashes of random pictures invaded his mind—a great battle, a large black dragon, a glowing green sword, a smiling woman of breathtaking beauty and hundreds more.

"Stop!" Danny begged, putting his hand to his brow. The visions vanished at once, leaving Danny with a throbbing headache. "What was that?"

Forgive me, Danny, I did not anticipate your reaction to my memories, his voice soft and soothing as it entered Danny's thoughts.

Danny slowed his breathing and forced himself to relax. *Those were your memories?*

They were.

Will you ever get them back completely?

I do not know.

Then it's up to me to figure out what I'm supposed to do, Danny thought, more to himself than Magear, as he relaxed into the bed and drifted off to sleep.

36

Preparing for the Journey Home

Danny packed the last of his belongings into his heavy duffel bag. Dressed in the same khaki shorts and T-shirt he wore on the initial journey to White Rock, he felt odd and almost out of place, no longer wearing the traditional robes of a squire. The clothes he currently wore were tight in some places, loose in others since he'd gained muscle and trimmed excess fat. Hefting the bag over his shoulder, he tensed, awaiting a pain that never came. His wounds had been severe. Thanks to Sir Virgil, he'd healed completely in less than three days, a feat that would've taken months under normal circumstances. However, the wounds of Syndil's betrayal flowed far deeper and would most likely never fully heal.

Forcing the dark thoughts from his mind, he picked up Magear, gripping the sheath just below the hilt. Giving the room one last look, he turned to find Calador standing in the doorway, his arms crisscrossed across his chest. Normally, he might have been startled, but over the past few months he'd become quite familiar with the blind Elf's tendency to sneak up from behind.

"Are you prepared for the journey home, Squire?"

"As prepared as I can be," said Danny, plopping down the heavy bag in front of him. "I really don't want to leave."

"Squires are required to return home so that they may remember the reason for their training. One needs a reason to fight, and it is difficult if that reason becomes distant or forgotten. Do not worry, Squire Firoth, the battle will still be here when you return. It may even follow you home."

"Thank you, Calador, for *everything*."

"It was simply my duty as your caretaker, Squire." Calador stepped forward, stopped within an arm's length and extended his right hand. "As of this moment, I relinquish that duty and offer you my friendship in its stead."

Switching Magear to his opposite hand, Danny reached out and took the Elf's arm in his, both gripping each other at the wrist, instead of the traditional Human handshake. "I accept the offer."

"I look forward to seeing you develop into a Knight of the Light first-hand, Squire Firoth."

"Me, too," Danny added with a slight smile, the gesture most likely lost on the blind Elf.

Calador relinquished his grip and stepped to the side, giving Danny a clear path to the door. "Go then, Squire, your friends anxiously await you."

"Thank you again, Calador."

Calador bowed with the grace of a swordsman and said, "An honor."

Hefting his bag back to his shoulder again, Danny left the room in search of his friends. Descending the stairs, he spotted them, awaiting him in the common hall, along with all of the other first-year squires he'd come to know. Looking out among them, he could feel the collection of eyes upon him. Slowing his pace, he felt self-conscious when their focus lingered on his presence.

"Over here, Danny!" Chris yelled, waving him over.

With the spell broken, Danny made his way to the long table where his friends awaited. It was odd to see them all without their usual training robes on, especially Doug and Matt; they had both slimmed down so much that their regular clothes looked more like large sacks drooping from their shoulders. "Information travels fast," he said, taking up a position between Chris and Anthony.

"Everyone is talking about you," said Doug.

"Well, that and Syndil's betrayal," added Matt.

Chris placed a reassuring hand upon Danny's shoulder. "You're a hero and the Mageknight. Supposedly, you defeated Syndil all by yourself, as well as an army of Shadows, in addition to some other impossible feats, so say the rumors going around the squires."

Danny shook his head. "That's not what happened at all."

"They are just rumors," added Anthony.

"If I were you, I'd milk it for all it's worth," said Alonso.

"You probably would," Chris accused, with a slight chuckle lightening the mood.

Alonso failed to catch the joke. "I would," he said seriously, causing everyone to pause for a laugh.

"Where's Sabrina?" Danny asked, noticing that she wasn't among them.

"She was required to attend a final meeting with Dragon Army," said Briza, adding, "since the duel between Dragon Army and Lion Army was canceled. She said that she would meet us at the docks."

"I see." On one hand, Danny felt relieved that he didn't have to face her here and now. However, on the other, he felt disappointed that she wasn't here to greet him.

"Hungry?" Matt asked, presenting him with one of two chocolate muffins he'd just procured from the table.

Seeing the usual assortment of breakfast food, Danny suddenly realized just how famished he was, as a rather large gurgle emanated from his stomach. "One thing I'm really going to miss about this place is the food," said Danny, taking the muffin from Matt.

"I know exactly what you mean," agreed Matt, his words muffled by the whole muffin he'd forced into his mouth.

"We should probably go," said Briza, once Danny had eaten his fill of breakfast.

A series of nineteen chimes marked the time, confirming Briza's statement. The *Radiance* would be casting off soon.

Danny looked up and noticed that the hall was nearly empty. After his three-day confinement to the infirmary, this had been his first real meal. So focused on eating, he'd failed to notice the majority of the other squires depart. Taking one last swig of milk, he stood up, hefted his bag over his shoulder and scooped up Magear. "Okay, I'm ready."

Together, they all took one final look at the hall that had been their home over the past few months, before passing through the double doors of the first-year barracks for the last time.

Army Avenue appeared almost abandoned as the last trickle of squires made their way toward the docks. The flags marking each Army were half-mast to indicate the end of the training year. Danny's gaze lingered upon one in particular, the deep red flag with a fire-breathing dragon sewed onto the fabric. He hoped that, upon his return next year, he would find himself inducted into the ranks of the army it represented.

Descending the first of many steps to the harbor below, Danny noticed a second ship docked next to the *Radiance*.

"Why are there two ships?"

"That is the *Lightbringer*," said Briza. "That is the ship that will take the Elvin squires home to Elsmelda."

"Speaking of which, I have something to tell all of you," said Doug, stopping mid-step.

Caught off-guard, Danny and the others descended a few more steps before stopping to look up at the brown-haired squire.

Doug waited until he had everyone's attention before he began. "Briza and her family have offered to take me in for the school year, a kind of exchange program."

"...Exchange program?" Matt questioned, his voice thick with curiosity as he adjusted his glasses.

Doug smiled and nodded. "I'm afraid I won't be joining you aboard the *Radiance*. I will be traveling on the *Lightbringer* and staying with the Elves until our second year begins."

"What're we supposed to tell your parents when you don't return with us?" Chris asked.

"That has all been taken care of," said Doug. "I wrote them a letter explaining the situation and they've already agreed."

"You told them that you were going to be staying with Elves?" Danny questioned.

Doug shook his head, followed by a slight chuckle. "No, they think I'll be studying abroad, participating in a Japanese exchange program."

"Why would you want to stay with the Elves?" Alonso asked.

Doug took a step down and stood next to Briza. "Ever since I arrived here and met Briza, as well as Calador and the other Elvin squires, I have been fascinated with their culture. Spending the school year with them just seemed like the logical next step for me."

Alonso shrugged. "Alright, have fun," he said. He turned away from the group and began the long descent to the docks.

"That's his way of saying that you'll be missed, man," added Chris.

Danny took a single step upward and extended his right hand. "We've all gone through so much together. It won't be the same without you."

"Thanks," said Doug, taking Danny's hand in a final farewell.

"Ready that rigging!" a rough voice yelled from the bow of the *Radiance*.

Briza moved to the edge of the steps and leaned against the railing to get a better look at the docks. "We should probably go. Nearly all of the other squires are already on board."

Danny began the steep trek downward, everyone else followed close behind.

"You are becoming a fine warrior," said Anthony, falling back, meeting Doug step for step. For emphasis, he gave Doug a heavy slap on the back, almost causing the smaller boy to trip. "It's an honor to call you my friend."

"Thanks," said Doug, after regaining his balance.

Anthony nodded before increasing his pace.

Matt maneuvered into Anthony's place. "Are you really going to stay with the Elves?"

Doug cocked his head to the side in a display of confusion. "Yes... That's what I said. Why do you ask?"

"Are you sure you can trust them? I mean, after Syndil's betrayal, I just don't know if it will be safe."

"What're you saying?"

"I'm just saying that I don't trust the Elves," said Matt. "No offense to you," he added, targeting his statement at Briza.

"None taken... yet," said Briza. "Just be careful that you choose the words that follow very carefully."

"You can't judge the actions of every other Elf based on Syndil's betrayal," intervened Doug.

"I don't," said Matt in his own defense. "Briza and Calador have already proven themselves trustworthy. It is the rest of their race that I don't trust."

"...But why?" Briza asked, her voice calm and unthreatening, this time.

"Because your kind has chosen to shut itself off from the rest of the world and I don't trust anyone that would choose to do that."

"You must realize that Humanity's past, the history of your race, is littered with numerous acts of violence against others, those who are different or misunderstood. Our two races parted paths many generations ago, almost before the recorded history of the Human race, due to a prolonged war between both of our peoples. Many lives were lost on both sides. The Elves faked their extinction to live in solitude because Human kind was thought to be incapable of a lasting peace."

Matt adjusted his glasses, intrigued by where the conversation was going. "So why join the Order to the Light and risk war again?"

"My race did not join at first. However, the Shadows proved to be a threat to the world as a whole. You see, if the Human race fell to their darkness, then we would most assuredly follow. The Human race is the lesser of the two evils in the eyes of my elders."

"Then . . . what happens when the war between the Shadows and the Dark ends?"

Briza sighed, "That chapter has yet to be written."

"So, in other words, you don't know?"

Briza conceded with a nod of her head, a Human expression she'd picked up over the last few months. "I do not know, correct."

At the bottom of the stone stairs, Danny spotted Sabrina and Rogen, both waived him over.

"It is an honor, Mageknight," said Rogen, extending his arm in formal greeting, once Danny was close enough to him.

Danny hesitated briefly before taking the blond-haired boy's arm at the wrist. "Rogen, I'm still just me. Being the Mageknight hasn't changed who I am."

Rogen paled as he chuckled nervously to himself and said, "I know. It's just that... well... who would have ever thought that you would turn out to be the Mageknight? Your defeat of Rigil makes perfect sense now."

"Thanks, Rogen, I think," Danny said, unsure if he should take the remark as a compliment or an insult.

"You have become quite the celebrity," Sabrina said.

Danny became self-conscious in response to Sabrina's statement. Looking around, he found a collection of curious eyes upon him. One, in particular, sent a chill down his spine as he locked gazes with Squire Vyce Ven Lasko, Captain of Dragon Army. The young captain seemed to be sizing him up as he looked over the railing of the *Radiance*. "I don't know if celebrity would be the word I'd choose."

Sabrina followed Danny's stare. "I think Squire Lasko feels threatened by you. It would be an interesting twist if the Light saw fit to place you in Dragon Army next year."

"I'm not sure interesting would be the word either," refusing to back down from the staring contest he was having with the Captain of Dragon Army. Squire Lasko broke the contact first when another squire whispered something into his ear, causing him to turn and retreat into the hull of the *Radiance*.

"He still doesn't look that tough," said Alonso.

"Well, you'll have to wait until next year to find out, man," said Chris, placing a steady hand on Alonso's shoulder.

"Last call ta board!" a burly deckhand yelled as he stood at the end of the gangplank to the *Radiance*.

"We better get aboard," said Sabrina.

Briza took Doug's arm. "We should be boarding the *Lightbringer* as well."

"We?" Sabrina questioned, looking from Doug to Briza.

"Doug has decided to spend the year with the Elves," Danny explained.

"Oh, I see," said Sabrina, turning back toward Doug. "Well, it should be a pleasant stay for you then. Elsmelda is a place of great beauty."

"It is always an honor to have the Dragonic grace us with a visit," said Briza.

Danny looked surprised as he glanced at Sabrina. "You've been to the Elvin capital?"

Sabrina nodded. "I have traveled there many times with Father, one of the benefits of being a Dragonic."

"Yes," said Briza. "I am sure he will enjoy his stay," she added, smiling in Doug's direction.

With that, Danny, Sabrina, Anthony, Chris, Matt and Alonso said their final goodbyes as Briza led Doug up the gangplank of the *Lightbringer*, both disappearing deep into the hull of the ship.

"We should go as well," insisted Chris, leading the way.

"Can you wait a moment?" Danny asked, reaching out and gripping Sabrina's arm at the wrist. "There's something I want to tell you."

Alonso, Matt, Anthony, and Chris turned in response to Danny's words, curious about the situation.

"...Alone," added Danny.

"Come on then," urged Chris, herding Alonso, Matt, and Anthony toward the *Radiance*. "We will go on ahead and reserve a room on the lower deck."

Danny waited until they were both alone before speaking. "I want to apologize for..."

"You look like you healed up rather nicely," interrupted Sabrina. A silent second passed before she continued. "You need not apologize for anything. Friends?" she asked, extending her arm.

"For now," said Danny, as he took her arm at the wrist.

Releasing her grip, Sabrina turned away from him and boarded the *Radiance*, allowing Danny's comment to go unanswered.

Danny allowed himself a slight smirk as he turned and took one last look at the Island of White Rock before boarding the *Radiance* for the journey home.

To be continued in:

Light & Dark: The Black Bonded

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About the Author

I began writing *Light & Dark* during my years as a graduate student at Ball State University while I majored in Counseling Psychology. What began as a simple hobby quickly turned into something more as I found that I had a passion for writing. While carrying the schedule of a full-time student, as well as working a part-time job, I devoted myself to writing at least one page a day. After graduating, I was given the opportunity to begin practicing psychology as a counselor at a local private practice. My devotion to my writing did not waver. Working a full time schedule and maintaining a full complement of clients, I maintained my dedication. A year or so later, I completed the rough draft of *Light & Dark* and began the editing process, and what a process it was. Writing this novel has proven to be a dramatic learning experience and I am sure that I still have much more to learn. I look forward to this opportunity as I continue to grow as a writer and hope that you, the reader, will continue to join me on this journey.

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Last but not least, read.

Danny Firoth is an average thirteen-year-old who finds himself at the beginning of his eighth-grade year, struggling with some of the more common concerns that plague a boy of his age: bullies, homework, and his mother. Sabrina Drake is the new girl. She is beautiful and spellbinding, but carries a fantastic secret.

Accepted into the White Rock Academy of Illumination, a school for young Squires destined to become Knights of the Light and battle the forces of the Dark with magical weapons called Bondeds, Danny joins his five closest friends in the training of their lives. Honed in the techniques of blade work by an Elvin swordmaster and educated by a colorful assortment of knightly instructors, Danny and his friends are placed on the path to becoming knighted members of the Light. However, the Dark may have other plans as they unveil a sinister plot in this fantastic tale of dragon-riding adventure, sword-wielding action, and coming of age drama.

